GLIMPSES OF RURAL LIFE

(English Translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili story collection 'Gamak Jinagi')

GAMAK JINAGI

(Original Maithili story collection authored by

Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal)

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English Translation

by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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***Glimpses of Rural Life** offers a clear, contemplative view of the villages of Mithila, where labour, land, and lineage shape the rhythm of everyday life. Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal writes with a deep sensitivity to both human vulnerability and resilience. His characters endure hardship without spectacle, guided by modest yet deeply rooted hopes.*

Each story lifts the veil on a world where social duty intersects with personal longing. Tradition holds firm, even as emerging pressures begin to reshape values and relationships. Open fields, narrow lanes, and the shade beneath a courtyard tree serve not just as backdrops but as vessels of memory, conflict, and a persistent yearning for dignity and justice.

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh's translation preserves the tone of the original: quiet, precise, and grounded in lived experience. It offers English readers a faithful and immersive encounter with rural life.

The collection reflects Mandal's steadfast belief that dignity is not the privilege of the powerful alone. It rises from the resilience of those who build society from the ground up, clinging to their humanity even in times that test it.

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Foreword

☰

In 1942-43, during the Bengal famine, Amartya Sen observed that although millions of people in Bengal died (about 1.5 million, according to the Famine Inquiry Commission), not a single one of his close relatives was among the dead. Similarly, during the 1967 famine in Mithila, the Prime Minister of India was shown how the Musahar people were surviving by eating bisandh, the root of a watery plant, yet a story on this was written much later, in 2009, by Jagdish Prasad Mandal. The reason for this delay is quite evident. Because Maithili literature had long been dominated by a one-sided tendency, our writers, like Sen's own circle, were perhaps not deeply touched by that immense human tragedy. In this sense, Jagdish Prasad Mandal's story rescues the Maithili narrative stream from remaining confined to such one-dimensionality.

Every story in this collection is remarkable, fills a vital void, and stands as a testimony to the revival of Maithili literature.

- Gajendra Thakur

Editor, Videha e-Magazine
www.videha.co.in

Preface

☰

Glimpses of Rural Life is the result of my longstanding engagement with the literary universe of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal. Translating Gamak Jinagi into English has been both an intellectual responsibility and a personal journey. This collection represents a world I have known intimately–as a student of literature, a teacher, and a reader shaped by the landscapes of Mithila.

Rural life may appear modest from a distance, yet when one approaches it with patience and a discerning eye, it reveals astonishing variety, emotional depth, and cultural richness. These stories have always carried a quiet radiance in the original. My task has been to convey that radiance to readers who may not know the language in which it was born.

Here is what truly matters: translation is not a mechanical act of substituting one language for another. It is an attempt to preserve a world. It demands attentive listening, humility, and emotional intuition. These stories do not merely depict rural life; they emerge from a specific geography, from the diction of everyday labour, from rituals and memories, from rivers that flood without warning, and from droughts that linger for years. Each narrative grows from the soil of lived experience, not from abstract imagination. Translating them into English without weakening their rhythm, emotion, or cultural texture has been a demanding yet rewarding endeavour.

My first encounter with these stories was as a reader moved by their honesty. Mandal neither embellishes nor sentimentalises. He observes. He recognises the dignity of labour, the quiet heroism

of women, the complex dynamics within families, and the weariness that stems from decades of environmental uncertainty. Floods, droughts, soil erosion, and migration are not mere dramatic backdrops in his writing–they are the very conditions under which life is forged.

In translating him, I wanted the English reader to feel this pulse: the sense that rural life is not static, but in continuous negotiation with change.

What strikes me most about these stories is their moral clarity. They do not preach or offer solutions. Instead, they allow the reader to witness how ordinary people create meaning in harsh circumstances. The characters seldom have material resources. They are rarely protected by institutions. Yet they possess something deeper: resilience, humour, affection, and an unshaken sense of dignity. Their struggles are real, their hopes fragile and their efforts extraordinary.

This collection reveals a world where labour is not an abstract concept but a daily discipline. People earn with their hands–not out of choice, but because it is often the only path available. They work in fields, ponds, forests, and on construction sites. They migrate to cities and pull carts. They dig roots from parched ponds, roast seeds into edible food, pound grain, stitch clothes, and sell lime, fish, and earthenware. These stories bring such forms of labour to the reader's attention not through statistics or social commentary, but through intimate portraits of individual lives.

Another hallmark of Mandal's writing is his portrayal of women. Their presence is not marginal–it is central. The women in these stories are not defined by suffering, even when they suffer. They hold households together. They think ahead. They turn scarcity into opportunity. They negotiate with landlords, contractors, and market forces. They confront social stigma with courage. Their labour, often unseen, forms the invisible backbone of entire communities. As a translator, I have tried to retain their emotional cadence without softening the hardships they endure.

The ecological dimension of these stories is equally vital. Rural Mithila has always existed in a delicate balance with Nature.

When rivers swell, they swallow entire villages. When drought lingers, it drains the land of life. When the Kosi or Kamla rivers shift course, once-fertile fields turn barren. Mandal's stories recognise the deep connection between environment and human emotion. People do not merely endure natural disasters–they interpret them. They pray. They rebuild homes on elevated mounds. They search for edible plants. They dig new wells. They survive. This ecological sensibility is one reason his stories feel both deeply rooted and universally resonant.

While translating, I often reflected on how contemporary readers might connect with these narratives. Much of modern literature–particularly in English–rarely portrays rural life with such depth and clarity. Urban concerns tend to dominate the literary imagination. Yet the moral and ecological questions raised in these stories remain profoundly relevant. Whether one lives in a city or a village, the fragility of livelihood, the burden of migration, the exploitation within labour economies, and the aspirations of youth resonate across contexts. Mandal's stories speak to conditions that extend far beyond Mithila.

My aim, therefore, has been to maintain linguistic simplicity while allowing emotional complexity to emerge. Mandal's Maithili is economical–rich in cadence, restraint, and power. English, when approached with equal care, can convey these qualities. I avoided excessive ornamentation and resisted the impulse to explain cultural details within the narrative. Instead, I allowed the stories to speak through their own internal logic. I believe readers are capable of learning a world by walking slowly through its paths. This preface is an invitation to that walk.

Before presenting a story-wise overview, I must acknowledge something essential: translation is a bridge. But every bridge must rest on two firm pillars. One is the original author, whose vision and integrity make translation possible. The other is the reader, who completes the circle by giving the translated work new life. If this translation succeeds in bringing readers closer to Mandal's world, the credit belongs to both.

What follows is a detailed, sequential introduction to each

story in the collection. These insights aim to illuminate narrative patterns, thematic resonances, and emotional undercurrents, drawing from my reading experience and my work with the text during translation.

STORY-WISE CRITICAL OVERVIEW

The Parched Seeds of Lily Fruits (Bhentak Lava) presents a striking portrait of resilience shaped by disaster. Set in a flood-ravaged village of Mithila, the story follows Musna and Jeebchi as their world collapses. While Musna sinks into despair, Jeebchi discovers possibility. Her finding of bhentak lava–the roasted seeds of wild lily pods–transforms scarcity into sustenance and grief into renewal. Through her steady labour, the household rises again, and the fragrance of roasted seeds becomes a quiet declaration of hope.

Mandal's narrative honours the often-unrecognised strength of rural women who rebuild life with intelligence, faith, and unwavering patience. The domestic sphere–frequently overlooked–emerges as a site of creativity and rebirth. Jeebchi embodies a truth central to Mandal's social vision: in moments of crisis, courage often appears in the gentlest hands. Ultimately, the story reveals survival as an imaginative act, where dignity grows from the simplest forms of labour.

Lotus Root (Bisandh) portrays a Mithila village pushed to the brink of extinction after four relentless years of drought. Fields crack, ponds vanish, livestock perish, and the social fabric begins to fray under the weight of hunger. Yet the story is not merely a record of devastation–it follows Doman and Sugiya, whose quiet resilience offers a counterpoint to the village's despair.

Doman, a landless labourer, embodies endurance without complaint. He works with unwavering discipline, even as fear gnaws at him. Sugiya, steady and practical, becomes the emotional centre of the household. Her acceptance of circumstance is not resignation but a form of inner equilibrium that prevents collapse. Through her, the household preserves dignity, even when the world

seems hollow.

The turning point arrives when Doman recalls an earlier drought and the hidden bisandh in the great pond's parched bed. Memory becomes a guide to survival. Digging into the cracked earth, the couple uncovers lotus roots and fish–symbols of life persisting invisibly beneath barrenness.

The story offers a profound meditation on resilience. Labour restores direction, faith renews strength, and memory rekindles hope. Even in the harshest drought, the earth–like the human spirit–retains a hidden reserve of sustenance for those who continue to seek it.

The Pod of a Tree, Peerar opens with the serene presence of five ancient Peerar trees–symbols of a natural order that endures without human intervention. Their quiet harmony contrasts with the turbulent lives of villagers struggling against poverty and drought. Into this fragile world return Pichkun, a migrant labourer, and his new bride, Dhaniya, whose energy and instinct for opportunity begin to alter the course of their lives.

Dhaniya stands at the heart of the narrative. Her confidence, market acumen, and courage transform Peerar pods into a source of livelihood. Where others see danger in the Sugba serpent and avoid the trees, she recognises possibility. Her actions–from climbing the trees to managing their modest earnings–reveal a steady intelligence that reshapes the couple's future.

The emotional strength of the story lies in the partnership between Pichkun and Dhaniya. Their companionship, patient labour, and mutual trust create a new foundation for dignity. Episodes such as the fish harvest, the bicycle purchase, and Dhaniya's gentle firmness in confronting Pichkun's toddy habit illustrate how affection and discipline coexist in rural survival.

With Somni Dadi's blessings and Munesari's support, the story affirms that resilience grows where labour, community, and hope converge. Like the Peerar trees, the couple learn to thrive through grounded strength and quiet perseverance.

The Foundling Son begins with the haunting image of an

infant abandoned in darkness–a moment that lays bare the cruelty born of social shame. This bleak act is immediately countered by Gangaram's compassion. Poor, ageing, and exhausted, he chooses responsibility the instant he hears the child's cry. The foundling becomes a blessing rather than a burden, and the story's central tension emerges between society's moral failure and the quiet courage of individuals.

Gangaram and Bhuliya embody a form of parenthood rooted in care rather than blood. With no wealth or livestock, they still offer the child what he was denied at birth: a sense of belonging. Kabutri's willingness to nurse him completes a circle of communal motherhood. The narrative insists that motherhood is defined by action and emotional truth, not biology alone.

As Mangal grows, the story expands beyond physical survival into intellectual awakening. He runs a tea stall, reads voraciously, absorbs Roopchan's folk wisdom, and eventually writes The Dead Village–a perceptive critique of rural decay. Sunayana's recognition of his work connects two different social worlds and challenges entrenched norms of caste and gender. Her choice of Mangal marks a union based on conscience and intellect.

Through this journey, the story affirms that renewal can emerge from the most neglected lives–when empathy, knowledge, and moral strength converge.

Two Paise follows the delicate journey of Fekua, a poor village boy whose dreams lead him to the city and bring him back with almost nothing. What begins as a simple tale of migration evolves into a nuanced exploration of how poverty shapes imagination, self-worth, and the longing for home.

Fekua departs for Delhi with childlike excitement, knowing little of the demands of urban life. His innocence is anchored by the quiet, steadfast love of his mother, Ramsunnair, whose labour and faith form the emotional core of the story. Though she cannot read or write, her affection offers him a moral compass no city can replace.

Through Ratna, the narrative reveals the harshness of urban

labour and the ease with which migrants fall into exploitation. Fekua learns tailoring, works hard, and briefly tastes pride–but ambition grows faster than discipline. His grand promises to his mother go unfulfilled, and the city gradually wears down his confidence.

The story's most poignant tension lies between Ramsunnair's hopeful imagination and the grim truth of her son's urban struggle. Her dreams expand even as his collapse. When Fekua finally returns home, it is not in defeat, but in the recognition that dignity often survives only where love and belonging endure. The story becomes a gentle yet piercing reflection on aspiration, failure, and the quiet strength of maternal faith.

The Wage-Earning Woman, Marni presents a compelling exploration of how poverty, labour, gender, and structural inequality shape the life of one woman and, through her, influence the moral fabric of an entire village. Chatoni–a settlement without land or official status–survives through solidarity, in stark contrast to the pride and self-sufficiency of larger villages.

Within this setting emerges Marni, a woman whose life has been scarred by profound loss. A lightning strike kills Subadh, Manohar, and Taunki, leaving her solely responsible for raising two young grandchildren.

Yet the narrative does not linger on grief. Instead, it portrays tragedy as the crucible that forges Marni's inner strength. Transitioning from agricultural work to construction, she takes up tools traditionally associated with men, rejecting the gender roles that seek to constrain her. Her journey reveals the contradictions of rural development: while road construction is meant to uplift the poor, it dismantles traditional labour systems and brings new forms of exploitation. The contractor's clerk represents a system in which survival becomes the only wage.

Marni's refusal to bow to social humiliation–or to submit to the authority of soldiers and contractors–forms the moral backbone of the story. Her quiet dignity unsettles those who expect compliance. Ultimately, the narrative serves as an indictment of a

society built on invisible labour. Marni stands as a symbol of unacknowledged resilience, a reminder that true development rests on the shoulders of those whom progress leaves behind.

Defeat and Victory captures the emotional and economic journey of a potter’s family uprooted by river erosion and the slow collapse of traditional craftsmanship. The opening scene–where Soman and Kapli sit beside their bundles, unable to move–symbolizes a profound rupture between their past and an uncertain future. The submersion of Maircha by the Kosi River becomes a powerful reminder that ecological disaster erodes not only land but also cultural identity.

Phulchan Pandit, the guardian of an artisan legacy, owns no land but carries with him the enduring skill of pottery–his family's final anchor. In Lachhmipur, the villagers’ warm reception and the building of the family’s first home reflect a cooperative spirit that once defined rural life.

Soman’s labour, displayed in a yard full of pots, lamps, toys, and ritual vessels, represents the dignity of skilled craftsmanship. Yet Mandal resists romanticizing tradition. The introduction of metal utensils and asbestos roofs marks the decline of clay-based crafts, pushing Soman and Kapli toward hunger and despair.

The narrative takes a turn with the return of Ramdat, their long-lost son. Gifted in idol-making and decorative arts, he reimagines the ancestral craft to suit modern demands. His success underscores the central message of the story: defeat meets those who resist change, but victory belongs to those who adapt. Through Ramdat, the family rediscovers livelihood, pride, and a renewed sense of heritage.

The Cart-Puller offers a deeply moving portrait of labour, displacement, and the unspoken heroism found in ordinary lives. Bhola, born into neglect and scarred by repeated rejection, grows up without protection or affection. His mother dies early, his father remarries, and even minor mistakes invite beatings. When his marriage eventually collapses under the weight of village prejudice,

Bhola leaves home–not in pursuit of ambition, but simply to escape humiliation.

Calcutta becomes the unexpected setting for his renewal. Though the city overwhelms him at first, it is among fellow migrants that he finds his first true sense of belonging. The dharamshala offers community, food, and dignity. Pulling a cart is grueling and thankless, yet the narrative frames it as a kind of rebirth. Through physical labour, Bhola discovers purpose. Every rupee he earns becomes a building block in the future of his children, Ratan and Lal–whose education stands as the clearest testament to his sacrifice.

The ethical core of the story lies in the sons' response. Their academic success is not merely a triumph of education but the harvest of their father's endurance. Their decision to bring Bhola home reflects a deep understanding that dignity must be reciprocated. The story ends not with dramatic victory, but with quiet fulfillment: Bhola's life, shaped by hardship, becomes the fertile ground from which gratitude, humility, and new aspirations grow.

Livelihood is a sharp exploration of work, morality, and survival within a corrupt social order. Through the contrasting lives of Shobhakant and Umakant, the story examines two divergent paths to earning a living. Shobhakant, forced out of school by poverty, arrives in the city without a plan but refuses any work that would compromise his dignity. His apprenticeship at a bicycle shop becomes his true education. Over time, humility and skill elevate him–from mechanic to tempo driver to eventual owner. His journey demonstrates that self-respect and craftsmanship can forge an honest livelihood, even in unforgiving conditions.

Umakant embodies the anxiety of educated yet unemployed rural youth. His degree yields no opportunities, and society ridicules educated men who return to farming. This disdain for manual labour is one of the story's most incisive critiques. Pressured to pay bribes for a government job, Umakant nearly abandons his principles. His wife's pragmatic reasoning underscores the painful truth: corruption

becomes normalized when survival is on the line.

Through Mishrilal's reflections, the story charts the layered nature of corruption–in banks, warehouses, block offices, and ration systems–exposing a world where honesty is systematically punished. Yet the final metaphor of the mango tree reminds us that ethical choices, though constrained, remain possible. Umakant's decision to leave the dealership and become a tempo driver marks a quiet yet meaningful victory of labour over moral compromise.

The Rickshaw Puller weaves together the intersecting lives of Jibach, Bachanu, Saradha, and the kiln workers Mahakant and Ragini to interrogate what freedom, dignity, and a "better life" truly mean. Jibach returns from Bombay dressed in urban glamour, but beneath the surface, he is restless, dependent on alcohol, and driven more by consumption than purpose. In contrast, Bachanu represents a rough, unpolished integrity. He pulls a rickshaw during the monsoons, works at a brick kiln in the dry season, and consistently puts his children's nourishment above his own comfort. He refuses stolen income, avoids driving while drunk, and follows a personal moral code that gives him inner strength.

The story opens with scenes of drinking, gambling, and reckless spending, highlighting how easily such integrity can erode. Yet a quiet moment on the cement platform–where Bachanu feeds his family before taking his first sip–reveals a richness of life absent in the "modern" characters. His world is unforgiving, but not empty.

Ragini's monologue serves as the emotional foundation of the story. Though educated and financially secure, she remains confined, isolated, and voiceless within her marriage. Her realization that Bachanu is, in many ways, freer than she is, stops traditional social hierarchies. Through these intertwined lives, the story critiques privilege and gendered power, ultimately suggesting that real freedom lies in self-respect, purposeful labour, and the courage to live without fear.

The Lime Hawker is a subtle, finely layered exploration of labour, dignity, and the quiet transformation of rural life. Through Makhni and her family, the story traces how a woman-centered

traditional occupation adapts to shifting economic pressures while retaining a core of tenderness and moral intimacy.

The narrative opens with Makhni's fall on the stairs–a moment that symbolically marks the end of an era. Her injury necessitates a reorganization of the household, and the reactions of Phuliya, Kabutariya, and Matkuria reveal the nuanced dynamics of real family life, where affection and self-interest coexist. Phuliya senses a new authority, Kabutariya yearns to inherit her grandmother's ritual knowledge, and Matkuria feels relieved that his ageing mother will no longer carry heavy loads.

The extended reflection on the lime trade functions almost as a piece of social history. Once a hereditary occupation sustained by barter, trust, and memory, it represents a moral economy where livelihood and relationship were inseparable. But with the arrival of stone-lime, cash transactions, and expanding markets, this intimacy begins to fray. Change brings financial gain, but weakens older networks of reciprocity.

Yet the story closes with a quiet gesture of renewal. In the Phagun dusk, Matkuria lifts the basket from Phuliya's head onto his own. No words are spoken. The act embodies shared labour, recognition, and partnership. Through this simple moment, the narrative affirms that true livelihood lies not only in commerce, but in the mutual carrying of burdens.

Division of the Ancestral Homestead transforms a seemingly minor village event–the partition of five kathas of inherited homestead land–into a powerful critique of moral decline, shifting values, and the enduring ethical core of rural life. What begins as a routine logistical matter gradually reveals a deeper conflict between inherited wisdom and the corrosive habits learned in the city.

Shrikant and Mukund, returning to the village after long years in government service, embody this tension. Their pursuit of prestige, subtle rivalry, and efforts to manipulate the land survey reflect an urban mindset in which influence outweighs fairness and personal gain overrides collective memory. Their distance from the

village is not geographical but ethical.

In contrast stand the village elders, who uphold an older moral order. Guru Kaka's recollections of Vaidikji, Jogindar, Mahavir, and Khaliqa evoke a world where responsibility, artistry, and courage once shaped communal life. Ramchandra, the young surveyor, restores balance by measuring the land exactly as it lies, refusing to yield to either brother's unspoken pressure.

The story balances wit with quiet sadness. The discreet maneuvering of Buchai and Sarup exposes the vanity of the educated brothers, yet their isolation also evokes sympathy. The final, fair division becomes a moment of moral resolution, affirming that true order arises not from wealth or influence, but from justice and shared ethical principles.

Brotherhood is a profoundly humane narrative that delicately traces the threads of family, sacrifice, and moral choice. At its heart is Dinanath, a boy raised in poverty but fortified by the quiet courage of his parents, Ramkhelawan and Sumitra. Their sacrifices–his mother parting with her nose-ring, his father working beyond his means–are modest in scale but monumental in meaning. In poor households, the story suggests, every gesture becomes a promise toward a better future.

The narrative takes a dramatic turn when Ramkhelawan suffers paralysis. In that moment, Dinanath abandons his education to support the family–not out of resignation, but as an ethical choice grounded in love and responsibility. His act reveals the story's central insight: responsibility is a form of heroism. The steady support of his maternal uncle further underscores the enduring strength of extended kinship in village life.

Dinanath's marriage to Sushila and his slow, determined rise through labour in the rice-husking trade present an alternative model of progress–one built on perseverance rather than ambition. This stands in stark contrast to his younger brother, Kusumlal, whose education leads not to wisdom, but to detachment, indulgence, and eventual self-destruction. His decision to sell ancestral land marks his moral decline, and his lonely death lays

bare the fragility of success when severed from duty.

In the closing scene, as Dinanath holds the dying Kusumlal and calls him “Brother,” the story’s moral centre is restored. Brotherhood is shown to arise not merely from shared blood, but from compassion, loyalty, and the courage to forgive.

Sister begins with the quiet decline of Sarojini, an elderly mother, yet the real drama unfolds around those tasked with honouring her final days. The story becomes a mirror reflecting loyalty, kinship, and the fragile ethics that bind families together.

Radheshyam and his wife Ragini anchor the narrative. Their acceptance of caregiving is immediate, driven by both love and the awareness that in village life, reputation often outlasts a lifetime. A parent's death–especially if neglected–can leave a permanent stain on a household's name. The emotional burden they bear is thus both private and communal.

The three daughters reveal the modern fractures within familial ties. Gauri and Sunita return without hesitation, acknowledging that certain duties transcend distance and convenience. Rita’s absence, by contrast, exposes a harsher truth: ambition and urban life can stretch bonds until they thin into justifications. Her failure to return wounds Radheshyam deeply, prompting his anguished declaration that sibling ties end with their mother’s death.

The story’s most striking moment arrives when Shabana, the Muslim neighbour intimately entwined with the family’s past, arrives at night despite the dangers on the road. Her presence quietly redefines what it means to be a “sister.” Kinship, the narrative suggests, is shaped not by blood, but by courage, memory, and the instinct to stand beside someone in their hardest hour.

In the end, **Sister** poses a simple yet piercing question: when the hour of truth arrives, who stays–and who quietly walks away?

Match-seeker’s Visit transforms an ordinary social occasion into an intimate exploration of rural honour, economic pressure, and a widow’s layered fears. Lukhiya begins her day facing torn thatch,

broken boundaries, and rainwater pooling in her courtyard. These are not merely signs of poverty–they reflect her deeper anxiety: that visitors will judge her home, her son, and ultimately her own worth as a widow striving to maintain dignity.

Everything around her becomes symbolically charged. A simple meal of rice and coarse lentils, an improvised curtain, even the utensils reserved for guests–all carry the weight of family reputation. Her irritation with Nagesar masks a deeper fear: that society attributes every household flaw to a woman's supposed inadequacy, especially when no man stands beside her.

Nagesar's steady, measured presence gradually softens the tension. His belief that affection, not extravagance, defines respect allows the narrative to shift from anxiety to quiet clarity.

Meanwhile, Domon and Buchan's walk across the embankment reveals another dimension. Rural wealth is being reshaped–by borewells, fish ponds, cash crops, and hybrid mangoes. Marriage, too, becomes a negotiation of labour, land, and long-term security.

The story's moral strength culminates in Lukhiya's refusal to accept dowry. Her quiet assertion that she will not "buy" a daughter-in-law safeguards the ethical foundation of her household. When the match is finally confirmed, it is her self-respect–not material display–that gives the decision its true moral weight.

Regret is a quietly reflective story that explores migration, duty, generational distance, and the subtle erosion of inherited values. At its core are Raghunath, his father Shivnath, and his mother Rukmini–a triangle of aspiration, memory, and loss.

Raghunath's departure for America follows the familiar logic of modern ambition: the pursuit of money, mobility, and a future unburdened by rural limitations. For Shivnath, however, the decision wounds a deeper layer of identity. He comes from a lineage shaped by sacrifice–his father, Devanath, risked his life in the 1942 movement. Freedom, in Shivnath's eyes, was a collective achievement rooted in land and community. To watch his son use that same freedom to abandon those very ties becomes a source of

unspoken sorrow. The story renders this contrast not through confrontation, but through silence and quiet disappointment.

Rukmini's pain is more personal. Her son's absence feels like an unraveling–the slow collapse of years of care, love, and devotion. Her grief echoes the emotional cost borne by countless parents whose children leave not out of defiance, but from necessity.

Raghunath's long stay abroad becomes a gradual disintegration. A cramped apartment, mechanical labour, and his wife's deepening loneliness expose the gap between imagined success and lived emptiness. His eventual breakdown and late awakening reveal a buried longing for the very world he once left behind.

The parents' decision to perform their own shraddha is the story's most profound moment. It is an act not of bitterness, but of release–an acknowledgment that their lineage, dreams, and traditions are slipping away, and that expectations must yield to reality.

In the end, Regret is less a condemnation of migration than a meditation on what freedom means when progress severs gratitude, belonging, and shared heritage. It suggests that the modern pursuit of success carries a hidden price: the quiet severing of roots, realized only when it is too late to return.

Dr Hemant follows a man's journey from confusion and restlessness to quiet moral awakening, set against the vast, troubled landscape of the Kosi floodplains. At the outset, Hemant is burdened by family disputes, avoidance of responsibility, and a drifting inner life. His first moment of clarity comes when he relinquishes his claim to ancestral property–a gesture that frees him, revealing that the true weight he carried was not loss, but attachment.

His government posting to flood duty, along with a threatening extortion letter, propels him into a reality he has long evaded. The train, rickshaw, and boat journey becomes a symbolic passage from inertia to purpose. His contrast with Dr. Sunil–a

colleague whose steady commitment to public service underscores Hemant's own disengagement–sharpens this transition. Sunil's quiet resolve illuminates how far Hemant has strayed from the ideals of his profession.

Crossing the Kosi River marks the story's emotional and symbolic turning point. Its waters, filled with both death and resilience, reflect the contradictions of the society Hemant is meant to serve. In the devastated villages, he encounters courage, endurance, and an ethic of mutual care that had been absent from his insulated, urban medical practice.

Sulochana becomes the emotional anchor of the narrative. Swept away by the flood and later sheltered by Jiyalal, she embodies innocence shaped by suffering. Her image of worms in sugar and chili offers a piercing metaphor that strips away Hemant's illusions of moral superiority. Her quiet wisdom forces him to confront the distance between his training and his choices.

By the time Hemant departs from Lachmipur, he realizes that seven days among the flood-stricken have brought him more meaning than years spent treating the privileged. The story ultimately reflects on duty, healing, and the search for fulfilment in a fractured world. Hemant's renewal affirms that true service begins not in clinics or cities, but in the willingness to step unshielded into the suffering of others.

Bobby portrays an unlettered village woman who quietly becomes the custodian of her community's cultural memory. Through her, the story reveals that festivals, especially Chhath, are sustained not by spectacle, but by labour, care, and the shared strength of women whose lives seldom enter written history.

Bobby knows every ritual, every seasonal rhythm, and every obligation woven into the fabric of village life. Her conversations with Sirkhariyawali highlight how the poor mark time not with calendars, but through baskets, clay, and savings painstakingly gathered over the year. Bobby's calm presence steadies those who fear falling behind, gently reminding them that rituals are meant to sustain, not exhaust.

Rahmat's mother adds another emotional layer. Her offerings, rooted in a vow made during her son's illness, show how faith merges with gratitude and remembrance. Bobby immediately recognizes this tenderness and responds with a warmth that affirms the inclusive ethos of rural devotion.

When Sonrewali confesses that she cannot afford baskets, it exposes the silent shame poverty brings to days meant for celebration. Bobby's quiet assurance that the Sun accepts anything offered with sincerity restores dignity and becomes the story's moral centre.

Bobby herself carries the unspoken sorrow of the daughter she never had. Yet she transforms this longing into compassion, guiding rituals, settling fears, and ensuring no household is forgotten. In doing so, she becomes the emotional and cultural axis of the village.

Ultimately, the story honours the resilience and quiet authority of women whose labour preserves tradition. Through Bobby, it affirms that culture is not upheld by wealth or temple hierarchy, but by the steady hands and generous hearts of those who hold a community together.

Kamini traces the quiet rebellion of a woman handling a world that praises female virtue while restricting female agency. What begins as a simple domestic story deepens into a critique of shifting social values, the decay of educational ethics, and the fragile position of women within patriarchal marriage.

The opening exchange between the narrator and Bhaiya Kaka frames the ideological tension. Kaka takes pride in marrying off his daughter but dismisses higher education for girls as unnecessary. His views reflect an older belief that women must labour without ambition. The narrator's gentle disagreement highlights a society caught between tradition and change.

Kamini's marriage to Lalababu exposes the distortions of modernity. Lalababu uses dowry money to purchase a fraudulent degree, secures a college position, and grows increasingly self-important. Kamini's quiet dignity stands in sharp contrast to his

vanity. When Mrignayani enters their lives, Lalababu’s shallow infatuation reveals the fragile foundations on which women’s security is built.

Kamini’s turning point is silent but powerful. After overhearing herself being dismissed, she gathers her daughters and leaves without confrontation. Her departure becomes the story’s moral center, showing that dignity often speaks through action rather than accusation.

The kindness of strangers–the old murhi-seller, the women cutting grass–offers Kamini the compassion her own home failed to provide. Their instinctive solidarity affirms a truth the story holds dear: in a society where institutions fail women, other women often become their only refuge.

In the end, Kamini reveals how endurance, integrity, and self-respect allow a woman to reclaim her life, even when society offers her no protection at all.

Translating Glimpses of Rural Life has been more than a literary task–it has been an immersion into a world where endurance is quiet, dignity is instinctive, and complexity resides in the smallest human gestures. These stories reveal that rural Mithila is not a landscape frozen in time, but a living terrain shaped by memory, labour, devotion, and the unyielding will to rebuild after every upheaval. What may appear outwardly modest carries within it profound emotional depth and moral clarity.

Engaging with these narratives has reminded me that the rural poor are not merely subjects of sympathy. They are thinkers, creators, caregivers, and survivors. They confront drought, flood, migration, corruption, and social inequality with a calm persistence that seldom finds a place in public discourse. Their victories may seem small, yet they are ethically luminous. Their sorrows may be heavy, yet they are borne with a grace that commands respect.

If this translation enables readers to step, even briefly, into the inner lanes and courtyards of Mithila–to feel the cadence of its speech, the weight of its silences, and the hope that flickers through its harshest days–then the labour behind this book finds its purpose.

Rural voices often fade unheard in the noise of modern life. Mandal listened to them with uncommon seriousness. My task has been to ensure that their stories travel further, carrying with them the truth, tenderness, and strength of the lives they represent.

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The Parched Seeds of Lily Fruits (Bhentak Lava)

☰

The memory of the last flood still makes the body tremble. Every hair stands on end. The terrifying sight of that deluge begins to dance before the eyes. Water raced faster than a horse. The flood was no minor one, not a young but an old one, an ancient and fierce spirit dancing in wild rhythm. There was no longer any sense of what was a big stream and what was small; each merged into one vast sea, erasing familiar boundaries.

Wherever the eye turned, muddy, swirling water spread endlessly, flowing southward with unstoppable force. Many villages and houses disappeared, leaving people homeless. Wells, ponds, borings, and hand pumps all sank under the flood. The sight was so dreadful that people, trembling with fear, grew thirsty but found no water fit to drink. Life and death stood face to face, mocking one another. Houses collapsed, granaries crumbled, and the stored grain was ruined. Along with the falling homes perished cattle, trees, and crops alike.

Tying together the few clothes and utensils left, Musna bundled everything into a sack, set it on his head, and fastened two strings of straw around his own waist and his son's. Holding his little daughter Dukhni close to his chest, he and his wife Jeebchi walked toward the high mound beside the pond.

That mound had once been a wild patch of weeds, thorns, and a public latrine area where snakes and insects made their nests. Now the flood had turned it into their refuge.

As shadow never leaves a man in sunlight, so the rain refused to leave the flood. Below, the water surged with full strength; above,

heavy drops kept falling. By the time Musna reached the mound, twenty or twenty-five families had already arrived there with their children, belongings, and livestock.

Finding a sloped spot near the edge for convenience, Musna placed his bundle down. He broke branches from a nearby tree to make a frame and began to tie them together. He tested the structure once, felt unsure, and then rebuilt it carefully, smoothing it with his hand until it felt right. Pleased with the solid spot they had found, Musna and Jeebchi unpacked one sack, drove four bamboo poles into the ground, and tied them with straw ropes to form a shelter. On the other sack they spread a mat, settled the children, and placed their few belongings safely around them.

When worry dried their faces, both of them fell silent. On one side they kept watching the two children, on the other they stared at the roaring flood. With hands pressed to their foreheads, Jeebchi and Musna muttered prayers to the river goddesses, Kosi and Kamla in their hearts and begged for their lives. The children sometimes laughed at the flood and sometimes shivered with cold. At the speed of the water a house loosened and began to slide; Musna grabbed a bamboo pole and a clump of brush and ran with them. The current threw up splinters and for a moment it was hard to tell which way the house would tilt. With utmost care he fixed five poles in the ground hurriedly. Slowly the house came and wedged itself on the poles; seeing the house lodged there, he called out and ordered his wife, "Bring a sickle quickly. Carry the household things as they are and go."

A dog had also been carried away on the roof of the house. Hearing people mutter, the dog leapt and climbed up to the mound. Where Musna had planted the pole for the shelter, a snake suddenly lunged and bit him on the hand. The leg stuck into the mud could not bear the home's weight. All five legs sank into the water. The house collapsed. Musna wailed loudly, shouting and calling for help, "People, run! Run, someone, the snake has bitten me."

Hearing Musna's cry, Jeebchi also started to convulse with tremors. As the convulsions began, he cried out, "Oh Dukhni's mother, the snake has bitten me. The poison has spread across my

chest. Only a little remains to touch the throat. Show me the children for a moment. Now I will not survive."

Jeebchi shouted and seized the arm of her husband dragging him upward. They reached the mound's slope, and when they tried to step up, both of them slipped back and tumbled down to the lower edge. Both were soaked through and more drenched, yet still they scrambled upward. Once on the mound, Jeebchi pulled a scrap of cloth from somewhere and pressed it against the wound. There was not a single person in the village who could draw out snake poison. But Roudiya had learned how to suck poison during the autumn festival. Everyone began to search for Roudiya.

Roudiya had gone to the embankment to catch fish with his net. Someone called him. Roudiya set the net aside, washed his hands and feet by the bank, and came to Musna saying, "Brother, my sucking is not perfected yet because I have not bathed in the Ganges even now. Still, I will try to draw the poison."

Roudiya brushed the ground clean before Musna and pressed his lips to the spot to draw the poison. Everyone watched him. But nothing happened. The sucking did not work. Because of the flood, it was impossible to summon a healer or a poison-sucker from another village. People grew hopeless. Beating her chest, Jeebchi wept and called upon the gods and goddesses, making vows of offerings. Yet since the snake that had bitten Musna was a blind snake, the poison had not spread.

Meanwhile the villagers began to move about. The old and the young, men and women, gathered at the edge of the pond, carrying small earthen lamps filled with raw clay and mustard oil. They offered them to the goddess Kamla, singing evening hymns. The children shouted in chorus. Among them Lukhia promised an offering to Kamla Maharani, one seer of sweet pudding. By the next evening everyone had finished the songs and returned home.

The flood raged for five straight days. But as dawn broke on the sixth day, the water began to fall. Floodwater comes with a roar and goes the same way.

By dusk the water drained from the courtyards and fields, though puddles and silt remained. From the seventh day onward

people started rebuilding their homes. As soon as the flood receded, many set out again toward the cities in search of work. Not a grain of paddy was left in the village, and the fields could not be replanted. The haystacks and stores of straw had been swept away without a trace. The husks of wheat rotted into dung in the mud. Cattle suffered even more than humans. People cut down leaves of mango, bamboo, and other trees to feed them. From other villages they bought and carried bundles of fodder and husk. Yet the livestock died helplessly. Those that survived grew thin like dry sticks. Then, as if to deepen the misery, diseases of every kind spread among them, some had hoof disease, some dysentery. A few families gave their remaining cattle to relatives in other villages for safekeeping.

After four days the local official arrived. Srikant, exhausted like a half-dead man, sat on the veranda drinking tea after smoking bhang mixed with tobacco. He brooded bitterly: the moneylender has left, but how will we ourselves survive the year? All the paddy was eaten up. A great mistake it was not to save even one basketful. Yet what difference would one basket make? Who would help whom? People are right when they say everyone must live on his own strength. Even the neighbour's stored grain has sprouted and spoiled. If someone comes to the door, I will show it. But I too am in need, where will I find more? The rice in the granary is all that remains. Not a single handful of paddy is left to give hope for the winter crop. Cultivation will not restart now; the next harvest can only be hoped for in the coming season. Those who buy and sell daily will manage, but what will people like us do?

While sipping tea, Srikant felt a lump in his throat. He remembered, "Father used to say, if someone comes to the door asking for two seers or two handfuls, do not turn them away. That is how Lakshmi visits."

Seeing Jeebchi approach, Srikant called out to her. All year long she had ground grain for others and earned her keep that way. In the village she was the most skilled at pounding rice and chura.

Jeebchi smiled and said, "Why are you so gloomy, uncle, even if you have so much? Will I die when I have nothing?"

Hearing Jeebchi, Srikant replied in a rough voice, "If

everything had been swept away by the flood and we ourselves had perished, that would have been better. Now when we have survived, we have to suffer the misery.”

Jeebchi, smiling, said, “Why worry so much in a single flood, uncle? Whether it is better or worse, the days will pass.”

Musna sat on the embankment smoking his pipe. He ground his teeth and thought to himself: the months of Aghan and Pus used to pass with bare hardship. We would save ten seers and manage somehow. Those savings are gone. Not a single sack of paddy remained anywhere in the village, nor a single rat to be found.

Then another thought struck him as he drew on his pipe and exhaled smoke: if only he could get a bowl of rat and the grey rice porridge in the cold months, what better comfort could there be? Such food would be enough to satisfy even the poorest. Oh God, you have taken the poor man’s happiness away.

Musna’s first name was Makshoodan. But people began to call him Musna for his love for a rat and rat's alley.

Jeebchi was cooking flatbreads on the courtyard stove. Musna returned from the well with a pot of water for the cooking and sat down to watch the fire.

Jeebchi took a piece of bread and salt from the tin box and placed it before her husband. Noticing the children’s hunger in the yard, Musna made a loud, urgent noise.

Hearing his father’s call, Dukhba came running, washing his hands and feet as he entered, and sat down to eat. Father and son began their meal together. From beside the hearth, Jeebchi smiled and said, “Everyone talks, but only those with skill will live. Just look around here, every house has its own tale of loss. Everyone cries and complains.”

Chewing his bread quickly, Musna looked at her and said, “So many fish have floated in with the flood that the pits and ditches are full and splashing. If only the water goes down a little, as soon as it settles we will start fishing. We will eat some and sell some. At least a few coins will reach our hands.”

Thinking of her own natal village, Jeebchi began to speak, “In

my father's village the Gandak comes from the west and the Kosi from the east. Every year the floods come, but the stream between them keeps turning and twisting. The whole village used to shine with water like a lake in the month of Sawan. Only one patch of fallow land stayed dry like an island. On that patch everyone built huts for the rainy season. By the time Kartik came, the fields would begin to dry, and afterward people would start cultivation. In the deep low fields and marshes, the lily fruit (bhent) plants would sprout and grow thick. By the month of Aghan they were ready for harvest. We would pluck the bhent pods, take out the grains, dry them, and roast them into lava. There would be enough to eat and to sell. Tomorrow I will go to Girhat uncle (landlord) and ask him to give us the bhent that has sprouted in the corner field."

Until now Musna and Jeebchi had earned their living by pounding rice and flattening chura with the hand-pestle, because there was not a single small machine or mill in the village. Most families kept their own mortar and pestle. Musna too had his for pounding rice. Everyone agreed that Jeebchi made the finest, cleanest rice. This time the rice mill would not work, but in the flood so much bhent had drifted in from other villages that the whole field was covered with its creepers. Jeebchi kept her thoughts to herself, not revealing her plan to anyone. Every day during her bath she went to the field to look at the bhent. The broad leaves had covered the land. Within a few days buds appeared and began to bloom. Seeing the flowers, Jeebchi wondered whether such a garden might belong to Lord Indra himself.

Within five days the entire field burst into bloom. Soon the petals began to fall and the lotus pods hidden beneath began to appear, round, green, and shining. Watching them, Jeebchi could almost see her future taking shape. Sitting quietly at the edge of the field she dreamed that this year she would buy a fine buffalo. If the lotus harvest did not yield enough for a buffalo, she would buy two cows instead. That would be their own wealth. She would graze them well and care for them tenderly, and from them their livelihood would grow.

All her life she had earned her living by pounding grain, but this year she felt that Kamla Maharani and Kosi Maharani had finally

blessed her with compassion.

Quietly, in her heart Jeebchi touched the feet of Kosi and Kamla. As soon as she touched them, thoughts rose in her mind: if I had my own wealth and worked hard on it, no poor fortune would steal my happiness. I would build a strong house, arrange my children's marriages. I would have grandchildren, and as long as I live I would be less dependent on others. Now everyone is helpless. If you do something, everything is possible; without doing anything, nothing will happen.

Seeing the ghangar tree, Jeebchi thought that if she uprooted some of the trees between the rows, the vines would crawl over and the pods would become plump; even with the scattered trees left, the pods would be plentiful and good. Income could start right away.

Filled with hope, Jeebchi began to clear the bhent plants. But the effort of pulling up the vines tired her so much that her back began to hurt and she stopped. Before long the pods began to redden. Flowers followed, then pods- tender, clean, round, and green. Seeing the healthy pods Jeebchi knew they were ready to be harvested. From the next day she planned in her heart to begin picking the pods.

At dawn the next morning Jeebchi baked flatbreads for the children and the two elders. They finished eating, picked up a plastic sack, and set out to collect the pods. Then a thought struck her: we can put the pods in the sack, but how will we dry them if they are wet? Where will we put the pods once we pick them from the water? Good sacks are not our own. What should we do?

Quickly Jeebchi tore an old saree and stitched two small sacks. She put the sacks into one bigger bag and left the courtyard with both children and the two elders, heading toward the field.

The colour and shape of the pods delighted Jeebchi. But ignorant of the work's realities, Musna argued and hesitated. When they reached the edge of the field, which had dried up, they placed the children, the bags, and the food at the higher strip and, wading into the shallow water, the couple began to pick the pods.

As she stood in the water, Jeebchi's sight was drawn to the pods dancing on the surface like coins found by chance. Her heart

leapt with joy. Without a pause, she began to pluck the pods eagerly with both hands. Seeing the plump pods, Jeebchi told her husband, “Break off the pods near the roots; leave the flimsy ones for now. We will pick them later.”

As soon as the sacks were full, Jeebchi climbed up and placed them in the larger bag. Musna did the same. When both bags were full, Jeebchi said to her husband, “Rest a little tomorrow. Bending in the water must have hurt your back. You stay here; I will go and bring what I left in the yard.”

Jeebchi picked up one bag and left for the courtyard. The load was heavy from the water and the wet things, yet she hardly felt the weight. After all, this was the beginning of their assets. She put the bag down on the raised platform and went back toward the field. Then she told her husband, “I will carry the bag. You look after the two children and the bucket.”

Carrying the bucket in one hand Musna walked ahead along with the children and Jeebchi followed with the bag on her head. After moving a short distance, Jeebchi said to her husband, “God has taken our sorrow away.”

But Musna did not feel the same joy hearing his wife say that. Back in the yard, Jeebchi set the first bag down and placed the second beside it, then began to arrange for cooking food. On the fourth day, while they were harvesting the first load of bhent, Musna felt a sharp pricking in his arm. At first he did not understand. When the prick turned into a swelling and began to bleed, he noticed what it was. Seeing the leech (blood-sucking worm) Musna’s heart sank. He began to tremble. He cried out loudly to his wife, “Oh my God! It has drawn all the blood from the body. What sin have we committed that we fall into this misfortune? First the flood destroyed us putting us on the verge of starvation. Now the leech has sucked all my blood. If this continues I will fall into the water.”

Jeebchi, ignoring her husband’s words, kept picking the pods while thinking to herself, “He pretends to cry as if a cobra has bitten him. How will he run the family?”

When the two sacks were full, Jeebchi came to Musna, took the bug in ber hand and tied it in a weed. But blood kept trickling out

from where the bug had sucked blood. Jeebchi pressed it with her right thumb. After a little while the bleeding slowed and clotted. She returned to the water to continue picking pods while Musna sat down. After some time Jeebchi said, “Come now, nothing more will happen.”

Hearing Jeebchi, Musna said, wiping his eyes, “This woman is trying to kill me. She wants me to die. If I die, she will marry another person.”

Looking at the two children, Musna added, “But what will become of these kids? Will they not die of hunger?”

Jeebchi smiled at her husband and said, “If you will not break the pods, then do not. Sit there and watch the children play.”

After filling both sacks, Jeebchi carried them to the courtyard. Musna followed, bringing everyone along safely. Once home, Jeebchi lit the fire and cooked a meal. The two children and the couple ate together. After eating, she began to split open the bhent pods with a sickle and take out the seeds-red, round, and full. Musna also joined her. The two children sat nearby, rolling two pods and playing.

Jeebchi piled the seeds carefully on a mat. After a while, Musna felt like smoking his pipe. He went to the hearth, lit a fire, and began to smoke. Seeing the growing heap of seeds, Jeebchi wondered where they would store them. As she thought, a memory of her mother’s home came to her mind, and she smiled.

Seeing her smile, Musna asked cheerfully, “Hey woman, what treasure have you found that makes you smile like that?”

Jeebchi changed the subject and said, “It is already dark now. Tomorrow morning I will dig a pit near the yard and spread a mat over it. We will keep them there.”

The next morning Musna dug a round pit like a lidless pot. Jeebchi cleaned and dried it. Into that they placed the bhent seeds to dry. Musna covered it from above with a mat.

After a month of work, Jeebchi’s courtyard was full of bhent seeds. Since it was an unknown grain, there was no fear of theft. Seeing the courtyard filled, Jeebchi’s heart leapt with joy like the waves of the sea. Her eyes glistened as she smiled toward Musna.

Seeing his wife smile, Musna frowned and said, “You laugh at me. Laugh as much as you can while you live. When God finishes His work and you die, then your laughter will amuse the city folk.”

But Jeebchi paid no attention. Her mind was overflowing with happiness. She began planning how to roast the seeds into lava. For roasting, she would need a large pan, and a big bowl for keeping sand.She would make the frying sticks herself out of bamboo and bring the sand from the riverbank. When she went to the potters' place, she would look for a heavy slab to make the pan. For heating the bowl, an ordinary earthen stove would do. She would also need a small ladle because the sand could not be handled by hand alone. For that a wooden holder would have to be fixed in it too. She would manage all that. Turning to Musna she said, “For roasting the lava, we will also have to arrange some fuel.”

The word 'lava 'filled Musna's heart with pleasure. Smiling, he said, “I will go now and bring some dry branches from Girhat uncle's orchard. I will collect both dry and half-dry wood by evening.”

All day long Jeebchi and Musna arranged everything they had gathered. As soon as dusk fell, Jeebchi began roasting the bhent seeds into lava. She had lit two hearths, one held the pan and the other the bowl. In the pan the bhent grains roasted, and in the bowl the sand was heated. After roasting the first batch, Jeebchi sprinkled a pinch of it on the fire as an offering and started the second batch. The new lava puffed perfectly, and the sight filled her with excitement. She placed the first batch in a tray and offered it to the children and her husband.

Seeing the bright white grains, Musna thought silently, “This woman is truly skilled. May God give such a wife to everyone? I realize now that what I never understood, I am tasting today. To feed one's children is no small thing. Through women like her, even society can change.” The fragrance of the roasted lava spread through the eastern breeze and filled the whole village with its aroma. Women from nearby houses came one by one to buy some lava. But Jeebchi gave the same answer to all, “First I will feed Girhat uncle, then anyone else.”

All afternoon Jeebchi kept roasting lava. Two baskets were ready. She stored both inside the house and covered one with a saree.

Then she told Musna, "I am going to Girhat uncle. You stay here in the yard."

Balancing the basket on her head, Jeebchi set out for Srikant's house. Seeing the basket, Srikant smiled and teased, "You look happy, Lakshmi Maharani. What treasure are you carrying there? Let me see."

Ignoring the question, Jeebchi smiled and went to the courtyard where Girhat's wife sat. Placing the basket before her, she said, "Aunt, make a little sweet from this later, but for now mix some salt, pepper, and oil and fry it. I will take it to uncle."

Taking the bowl of roasted lava, Jeebchi went to the doorway and placed it before Srikant. The lava shone white like pearls. He looked at it carefully. Jeebchi said, "Uncle, do not just look. Take a handful and taste it. It is bhent lava."

Srikant took a handful and tasted it. The softness and flavour delighted him. He called to his wife in excitement, "We had never known such a wonderful thing. Blessed is this woman from Kamalpur, whose skill and wisdom have brought such a lost treasure to light. She is a true goddess of the poor. Go, bring a set of saree and blouse from the chest. We will dress Jeebchi before she leaves. She is the goddess of the humble."

From that day on, Jeebchi kept roasting lava daily, and people came to her courtyard to buy it. In fifteen days she had gathered all the coins she had earned and counted them carefully before Musna.

Seeing the money, Musna's heart leapt. Laughter burst from his mouth. He looked straight at Jeebchi and began to count the bright coins with trembling fingers. ❑

Lotus Root (Bisandh)

☰

For the last four years of drought, the village had lost all its colour. The once green land, filled with trees and crops, ponds brimmving with water, and fields alive with hundreds of birds, insects, cattle, and goats, now lay lifeless. It looked like a silent cremation ground. Everyone carried the same thought in his heart that the village could no longer survive. And even if it did, it would remain nothing but dry earth. For what could the people of a land live on if no grain grew to eat and no water remained to drink? Would they survive on air alone?

The same sacred soil whose glory people had sung for generations now lay bent and defeated under the weight of four years of scorching drought. Yet, amid the breaking of hope, tiny new buds of faith continued to sprout. And why would they not? After all, this was the kingdom of Janak, Mithila, the same land where twelve years of famine had once yielded the fruit called Sita. In such a kingdom, perhaps, such a miracle might happen again. On one side, the drought carried its deadly arrows; on the other, the arrows of hope kept returning with greater radiance.

Even in such despair, the husband and wife, Doman and Sugiya, kept their hope of life alive as if it were a favourable season. With a spade resting on his shoulder, Doman walked ahead, while Sugiya followed behind with a bamboo basket balanced on her head, filled with singhi fish and freshly dug bisandh, the tender lotus roots found deep in the mud. Talking about the small things of life, they returned home from the large pond toward their courtyard. Wiping the sweat from her cheek with her right hand, Sugiya smiled and said, “Why will those persons who know how to work for their food and drink ever worry? "

Hearing her, Doman turned to look at his wife's face but said nothing. He lowered his eyes and kept walking forward. His worry was not about food, but about water.

Doman owned no land of his own, yet both husband and wife were so hardworking that even with nothing they managed to live with dignity. Though skilled in all the tasks of a household, Doman had never been bound by one. Still, whenever work came, in good times or bad, he never refused it. He had no fields, so he could not farm on his own, but every year he cultivated ten kathas of madua (finger millet) on a sharecropper's basis. From that he usually brought home five maunds of grain.

Raising a madua crop required hard labour. Every day the seedbed had to be watered and levelled. At the start of the Rohain (the name of a constellation) month, Doman would sow his seeds along the edge of the big pond. With water close by, irrigation was easy. The soil there was deep and fertile, so the crop sprouted well. Within fifteen days, the seedlings were ready for transplanting. When the rains arrived around Mirgisra (a constellation), Doman would always be among the first to plant his madua, but this year it did not happen. Without rain, the seeds withered in the dry soil. Not a single patch of madua grew in the village.

Nor had anyone yet plowed the paddy seedbeds or soaked rice seeds. The signs of drought had begun to appear in everyone's mind, yet no one wanted to believe it. People kept hoping because the propitious constellations were still delayed, and perhaps the rain would come late.

But just as Rohain and Mirgisra constellations had passed in vain, so too did Adra constellation. The season itself seemed to be slipping away. By ten in the morning, people returned home from the fields because of the fear of the burning wind. Without the madua crop, worry crept into the hearts of Doman and Sugiya.

The next day, the two returned from the big pond with bundles of old leaves on their heads. On the way home, Sugiya said, "This year not even a handful of madua has grown. In other years, even on sharecrop we had enough to last the whole year. This time even our daily meal will have to be bought."

The bundle of old leaves on their heads dripped with water, soaking Doman and Sugiya halfway down their bodies. Wiping the sweat and water from his nose, Doman replied, "It is not only we who have lost our crop; no one in the village has any either. If others had succeeded and we had failed, that would have been painful. But when no one has anything, why should I grieve alone? What happens to the rest will happen to us too. At least we still have the work of collecting old leaves for fuel, and what about those who do not even have that?"

Hearing her husband's calm answer, Sugiya smiled faintly and said, "Yes, that is true. But thunder may strike anywhere; who can lift a hand to stop it? This drought is the stick of God Himself. What power do people have?"

Until then no one had dared to call it a drought. Everyone believed it was simply God's play. Some years the rain came early, some years late. Some years too much, some too little, and sometimes not at all. When the rain came early, the fields flourished and the households prospered. When it came too late, the crops were half-grown, stunted, and weak.

When even the Hathiya constellation passed without rain, everyone began to accept that this year would be a drought. From the unplowed and unseeded fields, clouds of dust rose into the sky. There was no trace of grass or greenery anywhere. Yet could people simply give up? Never. The villagers of Mithila had long learned to live with their chests out and backs unbent; they would not show defeat.

Perhaps, they thought, Lord Indra was saddened by something and had turned away in anger. He must be appeased. Once His heart softened, everything would flourish again. With this belief, some began offering food to the hungry, others organized kirtans, ashtayams, and navahas. Some performed Chandi yajnas, others Vishnu yajnas or worship of Lord Mahadev. Many kinds of offerings and rituals began throughout the region.

Even the women class started offering goats and kids to the goddesses, Kamla and Kosi. If their mercy were awakened, they believed, there would be floods instead of drought. The ponds, lakes, meadows and hollows would be filled again. The drought would vanish, and even the half-starved fields would yield grain once more.

Seeing the stubborn dry season continue, Nengra Kaka stopped money-lending. He understood that this drought would cause starvation the next year. But Bouki Kaki, his clever neighbour, lent her rice at twenty percent interest. Her stock was small to begin with, only enough for a few months, yet it always lasted until the festival season. Bouki Kaki's lending business usually began around Matra-Navami and Pitri-Paksha and grew busy through the months of Durga Puja, Kojagara, Diwali, Govardhan Puja, Bhardutiya, Chhath, and Sama. By the time Sama arrived, her earnings were plentiful, for she would not only offer newly beaten rice to the goddess but also share it with others. By then, the new paddy would be ripe in the fields.

But this time Bouki Kaki failed to realize that a true drought had arrived. She kept nothing for herself to eat. Like the poor farmers who had no harvest, Bouki Kaki, the moneylender, was also left with nothing.

By the time the month of Aghan came, worry spread through every household what they would eat and what they would feed their cattle. Usually by the end of Kartik, people had already arranged food and fodder both for themselves and their livestock. But this year, except for Nengra Kaka, everyone's supplies had been spoiled. At last even the rice seeds stored for planting were pounded, cleaned and eaten.

There was no hope of growing rice that year. Even if it rained now, sowing or transplanting would be impossible. Suddenly everyone realized the truth, and fear began to settle deep in their hearts. As time passed, anxiety spread like weeds. Hearths went cold. Time stood before them like a gaping demon, mouth wide open.

Worry turned into illness. Every morning, sounds of quarrels and crying children echoed through the village. Women began calling their husbands lazy and unlucky; men called their wives witches. Their fights rose with the cries of the children until the whole village seemed to dance in misery.

Yet, even in such a time, Doman and Sugiya remained untouched by fear. They had already begun their trade in puranik leaves (a water plant) used as food plates since Judeshital (a Mithila festival) and that small business was going well. The big pond

covered fifty-two bighas of land, full of puranik plants. The market too was good, buyers came from Nirmali, Ghoghardiha, and even old and new bazaars of Jhanjharpur.

Sugiya worked alone, yet she sold plenty. People who bought the dried leaves ranged from sweet-makers and snack-sellers to those arranging feasts and ceremonies. Because of this, they managed to make a living every eight days.

All day long Doman gathered leaves, tearing them off and piling them up. Sugiya would tie the bundles neatly the next day, and on the third morning she would take them to the market by cart. The leftover leaves were left by Doman to dry, because even dried leaves fetched a price.

Returning from Nirmali after selling her load, Sugiya said to her husband, "This drought has turned in our favour."

Hearing that, Doman smiled and asked, "How is that?"

"All the traders have bought up their stock," she said. "The ponds in every village have dried up, and people have stopped collecting leaves. Only our bundles are reaching the market now. As soon as I unloaded the cart today, the shopkeepers crowded around. Everything was sold in a flash."

Doman replied, "You should have raised the price. You could have doubled what you earned."

Sugiya said, "I'll do that next time. Anyway, now the barries too are getting ripe, aren't they?"

Doman nodded and said, "A few of them have ripened. Let's wait another five days before picking them, as we will have to pick and so choose among them."

By the third year, only one large pond and five wells in the entire village still held a little water; the rest had gone dry. The big pond at Andaha was sacred, for it had been dug by divine hands. No one else could have made it. That was why every family took their sons there to bathe before weddings, and why, during Chhath, people offered prayers there with raised hands.

The very earth of this region is strange, solid clay, like a buried hill. Five hundred feet down there is neither a spring nor a trickle of

water, just dense soil. That is why no hand pump or tube well works in the village. People must go to neighbouring villages to fetch water.

The livestock had perished. Some people sold their cattle, others watched them die for lack of water. More than half of the trees had withered away. Birds and insects had vanished. The very people who once held seven weddings in a season to the sound of brass bands were now either dead or missing. Half of the villagers had fallen ill. Yet the stubborn few still refused to leave. The men had gone away to earn a living in distant towns, but women, children, and the lower communities remained behind, clinging to the empty village.

When the ponds and wells began to dry, people started digging new wells around the large pond, each family making its own. There was still a little water, though not enough to meet everyone’s need. The three years of drought had left the whole region exhausted, yet for Doman and Sugiya it was still their only way to live. Their work remained the same as before, but the income had fallen to less than half.

As land prices dropped across the village, Doman managed to buy a small piece of land. Sugiya, however, was not pleased. She feared the drought would continue, leaving the fields barren. “What is the use of buying land,” she thought, “when there will be no grass for the cattle and no water for the crops?”

But Doman held onto hope. He believed that just as a barren woman can one day give birth, the dry fields too would revive when the rains returned. After all, this was Mithila, the land of sages and seekers, where people had long believed in sacrifice for the welfare of all living beings. The elders had known well that rain alone could not be trusted; that was why they had built eighteen large ponds, twenty-seven wells, and countless irrigation pits across the plains. They had ensured their own supply of water for the worst of times.

For three years Doman and Sugiya lived in fragile peace, but by the fourth year unease returned. Every pond and well in the village had already gone dry. Only the great pond still held a little water, and even that had shrunk to a corner. Around its edges the earth had cracked, and in the middle only a few patches of lotus remained, surrounded by thick, thigh-deep sludge. It was dangerous to step into;

one sank immediately.

Helpless and weary, Doman began to lose heart. He thought, “If everyone else has left, perhaps I should go too. There is no sense dying slowly here. Life must be saved first; when the time changes, I can always return. And if not, then let fate take me wherever it will.”

The village had emptied, the people were scattered, and Doman, standing in the silence, began to prepare himself to leave as well. Seeing her husband troubled, Sugiya asked softly, “Is something wrong? Why do you look so downhearted?”

Doman lifted his eyes toward her but quickly lowered them again. Sugiya repeated, “Are you feeling unwell? Is it your body, or your mind?”

Raising his head again, Doman said, “My body is fine, but my heart feels heavy. The hopes that kept me going till now are all gone. I see no sign of anything ahead. What can I do now?”

Sugiya replied, “Nothing happens by our will. The same God who gave us life and speech will also give us food. Why worry so much?”

Doman said, “Everything is gone. This beautiful village is dying. Only dry soil remains. Shall we dig the earth and eat it? How long can one live without food or water?”

“Stop worrying,” said Sugiya. “Whatever is written will happen. For now we still have food and water. As long as this earth holds grain and water meant for us, we will find it. When our time ends, who can stop it? So why trouble your heart?”

Saying this, Sugiya turned toward the hearth and began to prepare the meal.

Listening to her, Doman thought to himself, “I fear death, but she does not. She seems ready even for that.” Then another thought rose in him: life and death have always wrestled with each other; to retreat from that struggle is cowardice.The man who is coward should not live in the world in the hope of better life. Looking at himself, Doman felt as if he had lost the very path of living. That was why the weight of worry pressed so hard on his heart.

He took a pinch of tobacco, mixed it with lime, and placed it in

his mouth. As the taste spread, his thoughts galloped like a horse through memories of his parents and ancestors. His mind wandered far, then circled back to his mother. He remembered the life he had spent with her, and her words about a drought when he was ten years old.

The memory of that old drought brought before his eyes the image of the big pond, the lotus roots glistening in the mud, and the fish hiding in its dark water. For a moment he sat still, lost in the quiet pull of those memories.

He remembered then that in the same old pond's bed, lotus roots still grew beneath the mud. Just like the yam that lies buried under the soil, bisandh, the root of puranik plants lies buried under the pond bed. Words escaped his mouth before he knew it.

"By God! In that fifty-two bigha pond, how many lotus roots there must be! And there will be fish too, singhi and mangur hiding in the pits."

Two gains in one plan. As the thought brightened his mind, Doman called out to his wife, "God is truly great. Just as He created countless creatures, He also arranged their food."

Hearing this, Sugiya was startled. She could not make sense of his sudden excitement and stood staring at him, her mouth half-open. Doman looked at her and said, "Put out the fire. We'll go out and eat after we return."

His enthusiasm made Sugiya uneasy. She thought, "Has he lost his senses? A moment ago he looked half-dead, and now he is so alive." Unsure what to say, she stood silently.

Doman spoke again. "Didn't you hear me? First put out the fire, bolt the door, and take a basket. Come behind me."

"Where?" she asked.

"To the big pond."

"For what?"

"Food lies buried there, waiting for us in this drought. Come, we'll dig it out."

Without more questions, Sugiya covered the hearth, bolted the

door, took the basket, and stood ready. Doman lifted his spade, and the two set out, he walking ahead, she following behind.

When they reached the pond embankment, Doman pointed toward the dried basin and said, “All that dried belly of the pond is full of food. There will be no shortage to eat or to drink. As the water goes down, we’ll dig deeper wells. Where the old lotus stalks have dried, there beneath them the bisandh will be growing thick as ropes.”

Stepping into the pond bed, Doman measured three paces south to north and three east to west, marking the ground with his spade. It covered roughly one dhur. At the northern and eastern corners he struck the earth. The soil was so hard that the spade barely entered. He struck again with more force, but still it did not sink. Looking ahead, Doman guessed that the earth farther on might be softer and easier to dig. His heart leapt with hope. Moving forward, he said cheerfully, “Hey, look here, woman, am I not a man? See, even the soil refuses to yield to me. You are my better half, try striking it a few times yourself.”

Sugiya laughed. “First wear my bangles and sari and give me your dhoti. Then I’ll show you how to dig.”

Smiling, the two moved ahead together. A few steps later, the soil indeed felt softer. Doman struck with the spade again; the ground yielded. Measuring another dhur, he began to dig. On the sixth stroke the tip of a lotus root appeared.

Seeing it, Doman shouted with joy, “Look! This is the bisandh!”

Sugiya replied, “Just from that tip you cannot tell. Dig the whole thing and show me first.”

Her words made Doman cautious. He feared that if he cut too deep, he might slice the root in half. Holding the tip gently, he bent down and began loosening it with his hands. It did not budge. Shifting a little aside, he struck again with the spade. The next stroke revealed one full root, then another, and then a third.

Together they dug all three out, staring in wonder at what they had found, white and shining, round and smooth like polished bamboo, thick and long as an elephant’s tusk, each about a hand’s

length or more, weighing nearly half a seer.

When Doman looked toward his wife, he seemed to see his life of fifty years spread before him. When Sugiya looked back at her husband, she saw the red glow of vermilion in her parting and the soft music of her bangles.

Carrying a basket full of fresh bisandh and four seers of singhi fish, the two of them–Doman and Sugiya–walked home together, their faces lit with quiet joy. ❑

The pod of a tree, Peerar

☰

Round, green, and tender in abundance fruits hung along the branches as lush and bright as the leaves themselves. These were the pods of the Peerar trees. Five such trees stood in the village, old and majestic. The great mango, jamun, and shisham trees that grew later were said to have sprouted in their shade.

The eighty-year-old Kariya Baba would often say, “For as long as I can remember, those five trees have looked just the same. So many storms have struck, lightning has fallen again and again, yet not a twig of those five has ever broken.”

They were not very tall, perhaps ten yards at most, nor wide and sprawling like banyans. Their branches were close and compact, strong enough to block the light rain, not letting a single drop reach the soil below. Dense green leaves dressed each tree like a festival garland, and the sharp, neat thorns stood along the branches like silent guards. The leaves were broad and even, as if carved from the petals of sacred lotus or the tanger flower. Their blossoms were just as beautiful.

Through hundreds of storms, rains, and summers, the five Peerar trees had stood together, never fighting for space, never shading one another out. Alike in height, colour, and grace, they seemed like five sisters in quiet companionship. When they bloomed, it seemed that each smiled at the other’s youth, laughing in the joy of shared life.

No one had ever cared for them, no one watered their roots, no one trimmed their branches, no one ever tended their growth. All sixteen signs of good fortune depended only on God’s care. Perhaps

that was why the five trees stood proud and self-reliant, owing no debt of gratitude to anyone. Every day they smiled and swayed gently in the mild village breeze.

Each year the five trees would bloom together. Their flowers ripened into pods, then fell away. Afterward, the mature pods, having lived a full life, would invite the wind like a final guest and send it to summon the birds. The birds came, pecked the ripe fruits, and carried away the seeds. In this giving of themselves, the trees fulfilled their lifelong duty.

People avoided working the land beneath those trees, for it was believed that green serpents, called Sugba lived on the trees. It was said to be so green and vine-like that no one could see it until it struck. Whoever was bitten by it, people believed, would find the gates of heaven and hell open before them, with nothing in between.

The northern part of the vast agricultural tract had once been guarded by an old couple, Ratna and his wife. Both had died two years earlier, and since then no one had dared to take the job. Everyone feared the Sugba snake that lived in the Peerar trees. Who would risk life and limb for a few handfuls of grain each year?

A year earlier, Pichkun had gone to Morang to find work. When drought came, even the farmers suffered, so what chance did the labourers have? Many evenings went by without a single hearth being lit. The poor sold their cows and goats; some went to Morang, some to Siliguri, others to Assam. Pichkun too had borrowed fifteen rupees from the caretaker young woman before leaving. Since then, the village had spoken of him as a man lost to debt.

Of the many men who had gone out to work, some reached Biratnagar, some Rangeli, some Siliguri, and some far into Assam. Everyone had given up Pichkun, thinking him a hopeless case, and begun to search for work.

Pichkun sat alone by the roadside near Itahari, under a tree just beyond the crossroads. He ate flattened rice and ghughni from a small leaf bowl. While eating, he saw two men walking northward. Gathering his food quickly into the edge of his towel, he began following them, eating as he walked, listening to their talk, and joining their easy chatter as they went along the dusty path.

As they walked on, they reached near Dhankuta. The two men with whom Pichkun was travelling were farmers. One of them offered him work.

The man's name was Mangat Ram. He and his wife employed more than fifty labourers. He owned a three-storied house built entirely of sal and timber. Some of his fields lay on the hills where he grew finger millet, foxtail millet, and other hardy grains. Around those plots he had planted lemon and orange trees as well.

When Pichkun looked up at the sunlight glimmering on the hills, the slopes appeared to him like a bleached desert. Everywhere he saw small trees, large trees, and layers of forested ridges. Watching it all, he thought he had stepped into another world. Yet because the path was known, he trusted that in three days' time he could find his way home again.

The vast barns, the large straw piles and the huge sheds filled his heart with contentment. His employer was wealthy; his job felt secure. He thought, "He will never dismiss me. When I wish to visit home, I can go on leave and return. I have already learned the road."

After a full year of labour, the longing to see his village grew strong. In all that time he had sent no money home. How could he have? He knew nothing of post offices, and no one travelled that route to carry news.

During that year he grew close to a young Tharu woman named Dhaniya, about eighteen or nineteen, a servant in Mangat Ram's household. She agreed to travel back with him.

Before leaving, Pichkun bought a woolen sweater and a blanket for his mother, and for himself a pair of full trousers, a long-sleeved sweater, and another blanket. For his neighbours he bought oranges and lemons. He packed the clothes and fruit carefully in a bundle, tucked his money inside the pocket of his trousers, and wrapped the bundle with care. For the journey's snacks he carried some puffed rice.

Dhaniya packed all her savings, clothes, and belongings that night. They did not dare to leave through the forest after dark, so they waited until dawn. As soon as the morning light appeared, both of

them quietly set out with their bundles. They took the same road by which Pichkun had once travelled. Reaching Itahari, they boarded a bus, got down at Bathnaha, and continued on foot. Crossing the Kosi by boat, they walked to Nirmali and from there took a train to their village.

Pichkun wore full trousers, a shirt, and sandals. His hair was uncombed, a bundle slung over his shoulder. He walked ahead, Dhaniya followed behind. Reaching home, both bowed and touched his mother's feet. The neighbours barely recognized him.

Inside the house, Pichkun removed his sandals near the hearth, untied his bundle, and quietly showed his mother the roll of rupee notes. The sight of the thick bundle made the old woman tremble with joy. She gathered all the clothes, pushed the money deep beneath them, and tied up the bundle again, placing it carefully in the corner of the loft. Dhaniya sat quietly in the veranda. The mother looked toward her son and asked, "Who is this girl?"

Smiling, Pichkun replied, "Your daughter-in-law. I married her there."

Within moments, women from nearby houses began to arrive to see the new bride. Pichkun's mother gave each of them a lemon from the bundle. Pichkun took out a ten-rupee note and handed it to his mother, saying, "Mother, I am hungry. Go and buy some rice and spices from the shop. Cook first, then I will bathe. After three days of travel, my body feels heavy with sleep."

The news of the new bride spread through the entire neighbourhood. Women came calling her to visit, and the elders decided to arrange a small feast in honour of the wedding.

On the seventh evening after their arrival, Pichkun and Dhaniya went to visit Somni Dadi. The old woman was sitting in her courtyard, spreading a mat and playing with her grandchildren. Pichkun bowed and touched her feet, then gestured to Dhaniya to do the same. Dhaniya touched the grandmother's feet and then sat at the corner of the mat. With a glance, Pichkun asked her to start pressing the old woman's legs. As Dhaniya began to massage them, Pichkun said softly, "Dadi, everyone in the village had thought I was lost for good. But I had gone to Morang, worked for a year, earned

something, and even got married there. Now we'll stay here in the village. You are the eldest among us, give us your blessings."

In the northern embankment lay the largest stretch of land belonging to Somni Dadi. For two years no one had watched over it. She asked Pichkun to take charge of its guarding, and also offered him five kathas of land to cultivate on share.

Seeing the chance for steady work, Pichkun agreed. The old woman gave him two bamboo poles for the hut, a bundle of straw, and a handful of rope to build it.

The next morning, Pichkun and Dhaniya went to the northern embankment to mark the spot for their hut. They chose a slightly raised patch of land where rainwater never collected. Pichkun stood there, measuring and imagining the place.

Meanwhile Dhaniya's eyes wandered toward the Peerar trees. She walked closer and began inspecting the pods. Seeing them hanging thick and heavy, she tore a strip from her sari, tied it around a branch, and climbed up the tree. The sight of the green, plump pods filled her with delight. She picked ten of them, each one shining and full like hidden coins newly unearthed from the earth.

While she worked, Pichkun started digging and levelling the ground with his spade. Dhaniya kept breaking off pods from the tree, her thoughts bright with hope, poverty turning toward fortune, hardship giving way to a faint light of prosperity. Her joy overflowed into song. She began to hum softly and called out to her husband, "Our fate has awakened! Look, the tree is full of ripe pods. Tomorrow we'll pick them and take them to the market. They'll sell for a good price."

Pichkun did not understand. He did not believe her words. Irritated, he asked, "Do you even know what this is? If it were something people could eat, wouldn't everyone have already taken them?"

But just as Dhaniya saw in the Peerar pods a sign of luck and renewal, Pichkun too felt happiness at his own fortune, the new job guarding the embankment and the five kathas of land for cultivation. So he decided not to quarrel and said gently, "I don't know much

about trading in the market. How will we sell them?”

Dhaniya was used to market work in her parents’ home. She knew every kind of farm labour and was equally skilled in raising ducks and hens and selling them in the bazaar. With that same boldness she said, “I’ll make a hook from a bamboo pole, pluck pods every day, and sell them in the market. You stay with me and watch.”

The month of Asin arrived. The rains stopped. It was the season of movement. The heavy monsoon had left the fields shining with green rice plants. Wherever the eye turned, the same lush green stretched endlessly. At sunrise, dew glistened on the leaves like pearls. The fields looked like brides in green saris and green blouses, wearing the morning light like a head ornament.

A soft east wind began to blow, spreading a gentle laziness through the air. Along the embankment, Pichkun dug three small channels for the rainwater to flow down into the lower fields. Then he blocked the ends to make little pools. As water collected, small fish leapt and fluttered in them.

Dhaniya would drain the pools and catch the fish. Pichkun carried them in a basket to sell at the market and even went around the village selling them door to door. One of the other fish sellers advised him to buy a bicycle, saying that carrying the basket on his head left the body smelling of fish.

The thought of a bicycle excited Pichkun, though he had never learned to ride one. For a moment he hesitated, then imagined himself pedalling slowly through the village, the basket tied behind him, selling fish with ease. That night, while returning from the market, he told Dhaniya, “We should buy a second-hand bicycle.”

Earnings always brought a spark of joy to Dhaniya. Smiling, she said, “Why second-hand? We’ll buy a new one.”

It was the time of Jitiya festival, when millet bread and fish were eaten in celebration. The day before, villagers had already given Pichkun baskets of fish to sell. Before dawn, he woke Dhaniya, saying eagerly, “I’ve already sorted all the fish from the pools.”

But Dhaniya, thinking it was only a dream, went back to sleep. In the darkness before dawn, Pichkun quietly lifted the baskets and

nets and went to the fish pools. It was still too dark to see the fish clearly. Pichkun sat beside one pool, Dhaniya beside another. He lit a bidi and smoked as they both began to gather the fish.

It was the day of Jitiya. People were eager for fish. Before long, men and women started arriving near the pools. With no weighing scale or balance, Pichkun began selling by estimation. The best of the fish sold quickly. They carried home the remaining catch and spread across the courtyard. More than half was still unsold.

Knowing that on a festival day one could not depend on the market alone, Pichkun said to his wife, "Cook the meal quickly. I'll go sell the rest around the village."

Dhaniya hurried to make flatbreads and fry the fish curry. After eating, Pichkun loaded the basket onto his bicycle and went door to door. By noon, every last fish was sold.

The sun blazed fiercely. On his way back, Pichkun stopped by the toddy shop. The place was crowded with tipsy men. There was hardly space to sit, so he bought a small pot of toddy and drank it standing. Then he paid and rode home.

From a distance, Dhaniya saw him pedalling the bicycle unsteadily and felt her heart twist. She had feared this, Pichkun had taken to toddy. She spread a mat and lay on the veranda, covering herself with a sheet, and began to weep.

When Pichkun entered the courtyard and saw her crying, he went near and asked softly, "What happened, eh?"

Hearing his voice, Dhaniya wailed even louder. Bending down, Pichkun opened her mouth gently and asked again. Sniffling, Dhaniya said, "I'm dying! A deep pain has seized my chest. Go, bring mustard oil from the shop. Rub it all over me; only then will the pain leave."

Staggering a little, Pichkun brought a bottle of oil from the shop and began to massage Dhaniya. Turning on her side, she made him rub her body thoroughly. When his hands began to ache, she said, "Now I feel lighter around the chest."

The word lighter filled Pichkun with hope. He continued to massage her. Gradually his intoxication faded, and her anger too began to soften. He was relieved that his wife had survived; she was

pleased that she had given him a good lesson for drinking toddy.

With the earnings of Asin and Kartik, the foundation of their life was laid. From Peerar pods to fish, everything brought profit. The man who had once lived a life poorer than cattle had finally stepped into the realm of human dignity. Just as humankind once lived in huts and now builds houses, Pichkun too began to dream of replacing his thatched hut with a small brick house.

There was still no sure source of drinking water, so the couple decided to make arrangements before the next year. They had no bed, no utensils, yet they were content to plan gradually for each need.

The paddy in the embankment ripened beautifully. The fields gleamed with heads of grain, green, golden, red, and black. Pichkun and Dhaniya spent most of their days there, living in home only at night. If they stayed away, stray cattle and grass cutter women would destroy the crop.

Every evening Dhaniya visited old Somni Dadi, speaking joyfully about the ripening rice. The old woman blessed her from the heart.

By the time of the Sama festival, the crop was ready. Seeing the heavy panicles bending low, Dhaniya told her husband, "We should dig and clean around the roots of the Peerar trees, so that they bear well next year."

Pichkun agreed. He carefully loosened the soil around each root and spread goat and sheep manure around the five trees. Then he poured two buckets of water at each trunk.

After fifteen days, the trees changed colour, bright green and fresh. New buds began to bloom at every tip.

Just as parents care tenderly for their children, the couple tended to those trees. And seeing such devotion, the five Peerar trees seemed, in their quiet, swaying way, to bless Pichkun and Dhaniya in return. ❑

The Foundling Son

☰

It was the third evening of the lunar fortnight. The moon of Chauth had not yet risen, but a pale glow had begun to spread from the east. In that quiet darkness, a young unmarried woman, fearing the gossip and shame of society, crept out and left her ten-day-old infant by the roadside. For nine days she had hidden the child, pretending illness to her family. But when the truth began to press upon her, she could no longer bear it. On the tenth day, she placed the baby at the edge of the path, covered it lightly, and hurried back home.

Five or seven minutes later, Gangaram was returning from the market. Suddenly he heard the cry of a newborn. His steps faltered. Standing still on the road, he listened carefully.

That was no sound of bird or beast, it was unmistakably the cry of a human child.

Startled, Gangaram's mind was filled with doubt. How could a baby's voice be here, in such a place? There was no one in sight. He stood motionless like a stake driven into the ground, staring into the dim light. After a moment, he began to move slowly toward the sound.

It was too dark to see clearly. Around him, insects and tiny creatures sang their many-voiced songs–some calling to their mates, others humming in contentment–filling the embankment with restless murmurs.

At last, Gangaram reached the spot and saw the infant. One part of his mind said, yes, it's a human baby. Another whispered, but how could a child have come here?

He set down the bag of vegetables he was carrying and gently placed his right hand on the baby's small body. A chill ran through

him; his whole skin bristled. Yet a strange warmth of joy rose within. Steadying himself, he lifted the baby in both arms, pressed it against his chest, and held it there. With one hand he brushed away the bits of grass and leaves clinging to its skin.

The child kept crying. Gangaram took off his shoulder cloth and wrapped the baby comfortably in it. Slinging the vegetable bag over one shoulder, he carried the infant against his chest and walked home through the deepening night.

Reaching home, Gangaram smiled and said to his wife, “Today God has been kind. He has given us a son.”

The words “given us a son” startled Bhuliya. She rushed forward, took the baby from her husband’s arms into her own, and stared at it closely. “Where did you find this child? Ah, what a beautiful boy he is!”

“I found him on the roadside while coming back from the market,” Gangaram said calmly. “Take care of him. If he is meant to be ours, he will live. If not, he will go back the way he came.”

Hearing this, Bhuliya’s mind began to race. We don’t have a cow or even a goat. How will we feed him milk? She herself could not nurse, for age had dried her body. A wave of helplessness rose in her, then faded. A thought struck her. My sister-in-law next door, still has a nursing child.

The thought lit a spark of hope. Bhuliya folded her hands toward the sky and murmured in gratitude, “O Lord, just as you make flowers bloom in a withered forest, you will surely arrange food for this child too.”

Gangaram was fifty, Bhuliya forty-eight, but the difference between them showed more than numbers. Gangaram still stood strong, while Bhuliya, wrinkled and frail, looked past sixty. Yet as soon as she held the baby in her arms, a strange warmth flooded her veins. It was as if youth itself had returned. Her face glowed, her eyes came alive.

Their hearts filled with joy, bubbling like air trapped beneath water. To calm the crying child, Bhuliya pressed it to her breast. For a moment the baby grew quiet, then began to cry again, for no milk

came.

Next door lived Gangaram's younger brother, Rooplal. His wife, Kabutri, was nursing their own three-month-old baby. Hearing the wail, Bhuliya went over with the foundling in her arms.

Kabutri, seeing her neighbour carrying a crying infant, gently laid her own child on the cot, took the foundling in her lap, and offered it her breast. The hungry baby clasped eagerly, sucking noisily. Watching this, Bhuliya said softly, her voice trembling with emotion, "May God bless you with seven more sons."

Kabutri laughed at Bhuliya's words and said, "I already have four of my own. If I manage to raise seven more, how will I ever keep up? Take back your blessing, sister. Whatever is written in my fate will be enough."

Changing the subject, Kabutri added, "Sister, it is strange that in this old age your husband has got such a fine-looking son. He does not resemble either of you. His eyes, his face, his nose, nothing matches. He looks nothing like Brother."

Bhuliya frowned, "You never learned when to speak and when to stay silent. You have no sense of respect for elders or shame for what you say."

Still smiling, Kabutri teased, "Come now, sister, what has happened to you? You scold me as if I were the one who caused it. If you two ever get another child, perhaps that one will resemble you."

Bhuliya did not lose her temper. The child's presence had softened her heart like water soaking dry earth. Looking tenderly at the sleeping baby, she said quietly, "Your brother found this child on the road while returning from the market."

Kabutri replied sharply, "Then why does the foundling's face resemble him so closely? He must be hiding something from us."

Bhuliya, a little vexed, said, "All right then, let it be ours. At least now you can rest your tongue."

Kabutri laughed again and said, "Sister, I will nurse this child just as I nurse my own. I will not let him go hungry. God has given me enough milk to feed both. It is a joy to see light enter your dark home."

Hearing this, Bhuliya's heart overflowed with gratitude. The hungry child drank his fill and soon fell asleep. Kabutri laid him gently on the cot and said, "Let him stay here, sister. If he wakes in the night and cries, I will feed him again."

"Very well," Bhuliya said softly, and returned to her own courtyard.

She told her husband, "Now the child will live. The woman from Godhanpur has plenty of milk. She will raise both children."

Gangaram looked toward the other house. The thought of the baby being fed elsewhere made his heart ache, but Bhuliya's words calmed him. Still, a doubt lingered in his mind. He asked quietly, "Why did you leave the child there? Shouldn't he be brought to our own courtyard? After all, he is ours now."

Looking at her husband, Bhuliya said, "You are a man. How could you ever understand what a mother feels? Only a woman can know that. Once a mother presses a child to her breast, she can never again think of that child as anything but her own."

Gangaram fell silent. A thought stirred in his mind, and he asked, "Since we are to be his parents now, shouldn't we give him a name?"

Bhuliya smiled, and the image of the Chhath festival came to her mind. "Usually the women of the house gather and name a newborn together," she said. "But no such ceremony was held for this child. Let the two of us choose his name ourselves."

Gangaram laughed softly. "Then call him Mangal," he said.

Seven months passed. The boy began to teethe and soon could stand and toddle on his own. He started eating solid food and drinking water. The love that grew between the couple and the child became so deep that neither wanted to let him out of sight, even for a moment. Bhuliya stopped working as a field labourer. She began spinning thread in the veranda and selling it in the village. Though she owned no loom herself, she worked on others' looms and earned a little money.

The couple felt young again. They worked the whole day without feeling tired. Whenever Mangal called her "Ma," Bhuliya's

heart overflowed with joy, and she would lose herself in the sweetness of that word.

When Mangal turned five, his father enrolled him in the village school. He studied there through the fifth grade and was now ten years old. But by that time, Gangaram's body had weakened so much that people no longer called him for labour work. Somehow, the couple managed their living by spinning and selling thread.

Life was growing heavy, but in ten-year-old Mangal's mind, a spark of awareness had begun to shine, like the sun rising in child Hanuman's grasp. One day he said, "Baba, you and Ma cannot work as you used to. I want to open a tea stall. If you build me a small thatched shed on the road, I will run the shop."

The idea struck Gangaram's mind. But then he wondered, who in the village even drank tea? How would the shop run? Still, he built a small thatched stall for his son. There was a neem tree in their yard. He sold it for twenty-five rupees and used the money to buy the utensils needed for making tea.

Mangal opened his tea stall. It was the first of its kind in the village, and the first shop always has an advantage. At first, people hesitated, unsure about this new drink, but soon they began to like it. Gradually, the shop became popular, and the earnings were enough for the two of them to manage their living.

Within three years, both Gangaram and his wife passed away. While they were alive, no one in the village had ever spoken ill of Mangal. But after their deaths, murmurs began to spread, and people started looking at him differently. Yet, the sales at his shop did not decline, for tea had already become a habit among the villagers.

Even after running the shop, Mangal's thirst for learning remained alive. Whatever little money he could save, he spent on buying books, paper, and pens. He studied by himself and practised writing every day.

Before his death, Gangaram had told Mangal the story of his birth. That story revealed to him how superstition and cruelty still clung to society like the roots of a weed. From then on, Mangal began to study not only books but also the ways of the world around him.

Running the tea stall gave him the gift of conversation. Sitting there, he learned to talk to people. In the evenings, after the rush of customers had thinned, Roopchan would come to the stall. Mangal would make two glasses of tea, and as soon as Roopchan drank, his mind would brighten.

Roopchan was the village storyteller, though a poor man. He had a few regular customers, but between them he would spend hours at the stall, spinning tales. He told a different story each time, sometimes of kings and queens, sometimes of lovers like Rani and Saranga, or Rajni and Sajni. Other days he spoke of Gonoo Jha, of the brave ballads of Alha and Rudal, or of Dina-Bhadri, Lorik, and Salhesh.

In this way, Mangal's store of wisdom began to fill up with the knowledge of books, the knowledge of society, and the wisdom of folk tales. Whatever story he heard at night, he wrote down the next day whenever he found time. The more he wrote, the smoother his lines became, and his curiosity grew stronger.

One afternoon, as the sun tilted westward, a man came to Mangal's tea stall for a cup of tea. His appearance was simple, and he carried a leather bag in his hand. The man was the editor of a magazine called Bharat Jagaran. He had come to the village to study its condition and culture.

While talking with Mangal, the editor became completely absorbed. He felt as if his heart and Mangal's heart had set out on the same journey together. When the trance broke, both of them laughed. The editor said, "Boy, make some tea. I have not had any all day. Tonight I will stay here and talk to you in detail."

Mangal prepared tea, and they both drank together. After eating and drinking, they sat side by side late into the night, talking. Mangal placed before the editor all the stories he had written so far. The editor flipped through the pages. The language and style might not have been refined, but the themes touched his heart. Smiling, the editor said, "These are wonderful pieces. This is exactly what I came searching for."

He opened his bag, took out some magazines and books, and said, "These contain the proper methods of writing. Study them

carefully. Once you understand the foundation, write on that basis. I am an editor. I run a monthly magazine. I will publish one of your stories every month and send you a copy."

For three or four hours, the editor explained everything to Mangal. The next morning, after tea, he left.

From that month onward, Mangal's stories began to appear regularly in the magazine. Among his many readers was a girl named Sunayana. She was pursuing her M.A. in philosophy. In the fifth issue, the editor also mentioned that Mangal was working on a novel titled The Dead Village.

The name stirred something inside Sunayana. Her heart danced. She thought, our country is a land of villages, and if the village itself is dead, what will become of the nation?

The idea struck Sunayana's mind like a spark. The same Sunayana who never spoke openly in front of her father was now ready to discuss the matter with him.

That evening, her father, Advocate Sahab, returned from court, drank his tea, and went for a walk. When he came back, he took out a case file to prepare for the next day's hearing. His wife brought him another cup of tea. As he sipped it and chewed his betel, Sunayana entered the room, sat on the chair in front of him, and said, "Father, there is a question running in my mind. Could you please explain it?"

"What is it?" he asked.

"I read in a magazine today that the village is truly dead. If the village is dead, and our country is made of villages, then what do we call the country?"

Advocate Sahab did not pay much attention to the seriousness of the question. He said lightly, "That is the concern of writers and thinkers. I have nothing to say on it."

"But writers are also part of this same society," Sunayana replied. "They live lives like everyone else. Then why would a writer write something like that?"

"The words of a writer can be understood only by another writer," her father said. "I am a lawyer. I understand the law. Now go, I have to prepare a case."

Sunayana rose quietly and went to her room. She sat down and began to think. In a country where there is no clean water to drink, no balanced food to eat, no proper clothing to wear, and no decent shelter to live in, what else can one call it but a dead land? People still drink impure water, somehow manage a few morsels, sit beneath trees to keep warm, and live surrounded by countless diseases. What can such a country be called?

And beyond all that, in a civilization thousands of years old, where the light of knowledge–symbolized by the goddess Saraswati–has still not reached every person, what kind of nation is that? So many questions stood before her, shaking her mind. Lost in thought, she sat on the chair and drifted into deep reflection. At last, one decision settled in her mind: she would first read The Dead Village. But where could she find the book? Then another thought came. She would write to the author directly and ask for it. She took out the magazine, copied the writer's address from it, and wrote it carefully on a small slip of paper.

The next day, Sunayana set out to find Mangal's address. It was around nine in the morning. After serving the early customers, Mangal had arranged the kettle, teapot, saucepan, and glasses in front of the stall. He was cleaning the hearth and clearing out the ashes.

Sunayana came to the tea stall because it was the place where one could easily find anyone in the village. Reaching the stall, she asked, "Could you tell me where I might find a man named Mangal in this village?"

Hearing his own name, Mangal was startled, but he stayed silent. It was as if he were searching for himself through her eyes. Sunayana sensed it too. After a moment of silence, Mangal spoke, "Sister, if Mangal lives in this village, I will certainly help you find him. But since you have come all the way here, how can you leave without tea? Please sit down. This is Mithila, after all. Here, welcoming a guest is as natural as welcoming one's own family."

Hearing his words, Sunayana felt as if a thirsty traveller had suddenly found cool water. She sat on a bench made of split bamboo.

Mangal washed his hands, cleaned the small pan, lit the fire, and began to make tea. As Sunayana stood up from the bench to come

closer to the hearth, the edge of her kurti caught on a bamboo splinter and tore slightly. She did not bother about it and quietly sat near Mangal.

Seeing her sit beside him, Mangal asked, "What brings you to Mangal?"

Sunayana replied, "Mangal is a writer. He has written a novel called The Dead Village. I tried to find it in the market but could not, so I came to locate the author himself."

Mangal let out a long breath and said softly, "And how do you know Mangal?"

"I read his stories in Bharat Jagaran," Sunayana replied. "There I came across a mention of his novel The Dead Village. I wanted to read it, so I came here."

Mangal understood everything. His heart overflowed with quiet joy. He thought, to quench someone's thirst is as necessary as feeding the hungry. But I have only one copy of the manuscript I've written. If I give it away, a whole year's labour will be lost. Yet not giving it would be a greater sin.

Then another thought came: I could tell her that once my circumstances improve, I will have it printed. For now, there is only this one copy. Yes, once it is published, I will surely send her one. Until then, she can stay here and read it.

By then the tea was ready. They both drank together. After finishing her tea, Sunayana said, "Please give me Mangal's address."

Surprised, Mangal replied, "My name is Mangal. I am the one who wrote that novel. But it has not been printed yet. Only this handwritten copy exists. I would request you to read it here. When it is published, I will make sure you get your own copy."

Sunayana was astonished. She looked at Mangal from head to toe. His face was darkened by smoke from the hearth; his clothes were coarse and faded like old rags. Poverty seemed to shine from every part of his body. Seeing him like that, her eyes were filled with tears. Wiping them quietly, she said, "I cannot read the novel here. Reading a book means understanding it deeply, and that cannot be done in haste."

The sincerity of her tone touched Mangal deeply. He looked at her, and in her eyes he saw a hunger for knowledge. He thought, I wrote this for others. When it is published, it will reach thousands of hands. For now, it will reach one reader. That is enough.

Just then, Sunayana said softly, “If I take the copy with me, I promise to return it after reading. There is no chance of it being lost. I only wish to read it peacefully, but I must return home before sunset.”

Mangal’s heart melted with affection. He said, “Very well, I will give you the book. The rest is in your hands.”

The moment the book touched her palms, joy lit her face. She glanced at its pages, then looked up at Mangal and smiled. For a brief moment, Mangal read her heart as she read his.

Smiling, Sunayana took her leave and walked away.

Sunayana completed her M.A. with distinction. Her father, Advocate Sahab, was a strong supporter of women’s rights, yet his thoughts often drifted to one realization: women are bound not by one or two chains but by the entire structure of life itself. Breaking those chains would demand struggle, sometimes intellectual, sometimes physical.

Lost in such reflections, Advocate Sahab sat in his chair one evening. His wife entered with a cup of tea, placed it on the table, and sat beside him.

“It is good that Sunayana was born into an educated family like ours,” she said. “Had she been born in a farmer’s house, people would never have let her live so freely.”

Taking a slow sip of tea, Advocate Sahab said, “Please speak clearly. What do you mean to say?”

“I mean you should get Sunayana married. Manoj will stay with us; he is the son, the support. But arranging a son’s and a daughter’s marriage is every parent’s duty.”

“I have a new idea,” he replied after a pause. “What if we ask Sunayana’s opinion too?”

His wife flared up immediately, “What will people say? Have you ever seen any parent asking their son or daughter before fixing a marriage?”

Hearing her words, Advocate Sahab thought silently. It struck him that not only men but women too often conspire, knowingly or unknowingly, to keep women bound. What a strange trap this is, woven by both hands.

He kept his thoughts to himself and called, “Sunayana!”

She came out from her room and sat on the chair before them. Her eyes went to her mother first; her mother looked sharply toward her husband.

Advocate Sahab spoke in a calm, measured tone, “Daughter, you have now completed your M.A. It is every parent’s responsibility to see their children settled in marriage. I too wish to fulfill that duty. Do you have anything to say about it?”

Hearing her father’s words, a tremor ran through Sunayana’s body. Yet beneath that tremor, a quiet strength stirred. Speaking softly but with conviction, she said, “Father, marriage is indeed a necessary process for both man and woman. It sustains the cycle of creation itself. But the question is- what kind of marriage? What we see around us today, ninety or ninety-five percent of it, is mismatched. Some are arranged for wealth, some for dowry, some for caste or lineage, and some for mere convenience. In my view, marriage should be based on the union of minds. Only then will it be lasting and joyful.”

Before she could finish, her mother burst in, visibly agitated.

“Daughter, in Mithila our tradition has always been that such matters are decided by parents, not by sons or daughters. If children start deciding their own marriages, society will collapse.”

Sunayana replied calmly, “That is a fine thing to say, Mother. But along with preserving tradition, we must also see the flaws it hides.”

Advocate Sahab sat silently, his hand covering his mouth, listening to both sides. Sunayana’s reasoning began to unsettle her mother, yet she refused to yield.

Seeking balance, Advocate Sahab said gently, “All right, daughter, tell me your view clearly.”

Sunayana asked, “Father, how much do you plan to spend on

my marriage?”

The question startled him. But regaining composure, he replied in a low voice, “You already know my means, child. But whatever is within them, I will not be miserly. The little we have belongs to both you and your brother.”

Hearing her father, Sunayana spoke with quiet determination, her voice steady yet full of warmth.

“Father, greatness does not come from wealth or the body. A person becomes great through knowledge and duty. Every woman wishes for a life partner who is wise and hardworking. I am not giving you a final decision today, but I will say this much, there is a man named Mangal in Sonepur who runs a small tea stall. He has no one of his own. Yet his work and intellect will one day make him known to the world as a great writer. Poverty has trapped him deeply, but if someone helps him rise above it, he will shine in the sky like the rising sun.”

Advocate Sahab listened quietly, then said, “Daughter, if your heart truly feels for him, I have no objection. But think carefully while there’s still time.”

Sunayana replied, “There may be many differences between us, but our souls are equal. I too wish to write about the condition of women, because the injustice done to them from ages past still shakes my heart. Even the most beautiful things in the world seem dull before that pain.”

Advocate Sahab nodded slowly.

“Very well, I accept your thought. Go and see for yourself how much help Mangal needs to stand on his feet. I will provide whatever support is required.”

Hearing her father’s words, Sunayana smiled and quietly returned to her room. Advocate Sahab sat deep in thought, reflecting on his daughter’s conviction, while his wife’s anger kept growing stronger. ❑

Two Paise

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Following others Fekua decided to go to the rally in Delhi. The train would leave the evening after tomorrow. He had heard so much about Delhi's laddus that the very thought of them made his mouth water. It seemed a good chance, no ticket required, plenty of people going. He would only need food for four days. Anyway, people rarely eat much on trains; finding a place to relieve themselves is trouble enough.

"Ma," he said, "I'm going to Delhi the day after tomorrow. Will you give me something for expenses?"

His mother asked, "And what will you take with you?"

"Two seers of flattened rice," he said. "Doctor Sahib and Nagendra ji told everyone to bring some. Grind two seers for me too."

His mother didn't believe him. Two seers barely last a day, she thought, how will they feed him for four? Then she decided she would add eight rotis as well. If nothing else, rotis are a sure meal.

Before the train arrived, Fekua reached the station with the crowd marching toward the rally. It was the first time in his life he would ride a train. Seeing the packed platform, his heart trembled, half fear, half excitement. So many people climbing aboard! If they can get on, surely I can too, he thought.

Between Nirmali and Sakri ran the narrow line, the trains small and noisy. But from Sakri to Delhi the coaches were big, the tracks wide. Fekua boarded at Sakri; the Delhi train stood waiting. As soon as the crowd from Nirmali had climbed in, the whistle blew and the train rolled out.

Normally the journey from Sakri to Delhi takes twenty-four hours, but this time it did not. It took forty. Fekua never knew how

those forty hours passed. He reached Delhi as if in a dream, neither eating once nor drinking water, yet feeling no hunger.

When the train stopped and he looked out of the window, he saw rows of policemen patrolling the platform. His eyes were fixed on one especially fat constable, his gaze moved from the man's belly to the red belt six fingers wide that kept sliding down, to the sweat shining like oil on his forehead, to the ten-kilo rifle dangling from his shoulder. Just then Fekua saw Doctor Sahib waving, signalling his companions to get down. The moment he saw the sign, Fekua jumped and hurried off the train.

As soon as Fekua stepped off the platform and started toward the musafir khana (travellers' lodge), his eyes caught sight of his cousin Ratna, a driver of a four-wheeler who had come to drop off his employer to catch the train. The moment Fekua saw him, he ran up and touched his brother's feet. Without waiting for talk, he asked for the way to Lal Qila Maidan.

Ratna pulled him back gently and asked, "How's everyone at home?"

Fekua didn't answer that. He said only, "I'll be at Lal Qila Maidan till tomorrow evening. Come there. Don't stop me now."

"At least have a cup of tea?"

"No, not now. Nothing at all."

Fekua walked ahead. Ratna stood watching him go, unable to lift his own foot to follow. Something inside him whispered that they probably wouldn't meet again tomorrow. In such a huge crowd, who could tell where anyone might end up? And it would be evening by then, who knows if there'd be light? This was Delhi after all, a city where in one rented room someone sings a lullaby while in the next a woman weeps.

He felt strange, a heaviness in the mind he'd never known. Should I take leave tomorrow and go find him? He thought. Yes, I'll meet him, show him the Red Fort and Jama Masjid.

The next morning Ratna set out early to find Fekua. At Lal Qila Maidan they met easily. The two brothers sat together, ate dry ragi rotis from home, and drank water. They spent the whole day side by

side, and after the rally ended, returned to Ratna's lodging. Ratna, being a driver for a wealthy Seth, had a fine room with all facilities, bright and clean. But somehow the comfort made Fekua uneasy. His mother's words echoed in his heart: "Wear another's finery and call it your own, and you'll soon feel its shame. Be content with what's yours."

Yet her words didn't stay long. It had been three days since he had bathed; his skin itched with grime. Turning to Ratna, he said, "Brother, I'll bathe first. I can't feel settled without it. I'm sleepy too, but I'll eat after a bath and then sleep well."

Ratna showed him to the bathroom. The light glowed bright, the water ran freely from the tap, things Fekua had never seen. While he bathed, Ratna lit the gas stove and began to cook.

He bathed with complete contentment, and his mind grew calm. Now that he had reached Delhi, he thought he must take something worthwhile back home. He sat beside Ratna. As the meal took time to cook, Ratna said, "Boy, this is Delhi. Here people work sixteen hours a day. They get their salary along with overtime, yet life does not become easy. They can't pay off their village debts, and they find no real peace here either. One feels like being haunted all the time. I'm telling you this because you're my younger brother."

Fekua stayed silent for a moment, then said quietly, "Brother, you're elder and wiser in every way. While I'm with you, I'll follow your understanding of what's right and wrong."

Hearing that, Ratna felt a sense of duty settle in his heart. He said, "Listen, boy. What I just told you was about the factory workers, but not everyone lives like that. Some people, through hard work and skill, rise from poverty and build a life of their own. There's a man from our own region, we used to call him Dhorba, a farmer. But now he's known as Dhorhai Babu. When he first came here, he stayed with me for four days. I got him a job in a hair salon. At first, he felt ashamed to work there because of his background. But within a few days, he became so skilled that he could outdo anyone. His earnings increased, his confidence grew.

After three years, his heart turned toward home. He thought: Now that I've learned the work, I can make a living anywhere. If not

here, then back in the village. Even if I earn just a little, at least I will serve my people. And that's exactly what he did.

"Look at that!" Ratna said with a half-smile. "Back in the village, people called him Thakur, some said Barber, some said Hajjam. Even his wife was mocked as Barber's wife. The worst came when the whole family was cut off from community events and caste gatherings. Still, he stayed firm in his work. He bid farewell to the village and moved to Delhi with his family. What a wildflower he turned out to be! Here, he built his own salon business. Now he has six workers under him. He even married his sister to an engineer. I was there at the wedding."

Fekua said, "I won't feel any shame either. Whatever work you find for me, I'll not step back."

Ratna replied, "The day after tomorrow is Sunday, my day off. Till then, take some rest."

Fekua frowned, "Resting that long doesn't seem right to me. I'll go wherever you send me."

Ratna laughed, "You fool! In the village, people boast that so-and-so is clever enough to earn even a single coin. But here everyone's clever. You'll see, the biggest business in this city is buying and selling people. Someone will see you're from the village, lure you in, say they'll get you a job on an airplane, and then sell you off in some foreign land."

Fekua felt stung but stayed quiet. He thought, he's my brother, he can speak like that. Still, he held his breath and said nothing.

Three days later, he started working at a tailor's shop with a salary of two thousand rupees a month.He had his duty from six in the morning to nine at night, with only one short break for tea and another for food. He often thought that he could work twenty hours a day if he had to do so but then how would he find eight hours to sleep? Soon he remembered that if one wanted to earn, comfort had to be sacrificed.

There were eight tailors in the shop, all skilled. Being new, Fekua began with sweeping, folding clothes, and fetching things. Slowly, he learned to cut fabric and run the sewing machine.

He and his mother were the only two left in the family. His

father had died ten years ago. Now he was in Delhi, and she in the village, but she was strong, working in the fields like a man. Even while working, he missed her. He missed the village, its earth, its air.

Memories of home stirred a strange ache in his heart. He thought of how migrant families lived, rooms filled with things they barely used: radios, watches, TVs, mobiles. Who doesn't crave comfort? But what's the use of desire when you don't have the means?

Still, the two-thousand-rupee salary filled him with pride. How could it not? But pride rose faster than his understanding of expenses. After a few days he thought to inform about him to his mother. Eight days later, he said to Ratna, "Brother, I can't read or write. But now that I've got a job, I should send the message to my mother. She'll be wondering where her son has gone."

Ratna understood what Fekua meant. He took a postcard from his VIP bag and got ready to write the letter. He asked, "What should I write to Sister?"

Fekua began dictating:

Place: Delhi

Date: 05.06.2007

Mother,

I touch your feet.

By God's grace and your blessings, I've found such a job that I never even dreamed of. I'm getting two thousand rupees a month. I won't need much for myself. Whatever I save, I'll send you every month. Tell Bengwa Kaka to go and ask the price of bricks at the chimney. Let's build the house first. As we have no tube-well, let's get one sink for ourselves. And buy the small patch of Malik Baba's land in front of our yard.

Your son,

Fekua

It was seven in the morning, a misty monsoon hour. The sun appeared for a moment and then slipped behind the clouds. A soft

eastern breeze blew. With five or six other women, Fekua's mother, Ramsunnair, set out to plant paddy. A little way down the path, she saw the postman coming. Unlike other women who received long mobile messages and replied with gossip, Ramsunnair stayed quiet. Her heart felt still, steady.

The postman stopped before her, smiled, and said, "Auntie, a letter has come from Fekua."

The postman pulled the postcard from his satchel and handed it over. All six women surrounded him, curious from every side.

As soon as the card touched her hands, Ramsunnair's mind fluttered like a dry leaf caught in a warm gust, rising and whirling in the air. It was the first letter of her life. For a moment she thought of getting someone to read it aloud, but the postman had already gone. She didn't mind. While he was near, she hadn't even thought of reading it. Then she decided, I'll finish my work first, tie it safely to the post, and read it later when I come down. That's what she did.

By the time the sun tilted westward, Ramsunnair finished transplanting the paddy and came home. She took the letter and went to Shyam's house to have it read. He lived close by. Holding the postcard in his hand, Shyam began reading it aloud like a sacred Satyanarayan Katha. But when he reached the line "two thousand rupees monthly salary," Ramsunnair's thoughts drifted away. She began to dream of her son's return, of the house alive again with warmth. He's grown up enough now, must have learned sense. I'll get him married next year, she thought. This courtyard feels haunted without him.

But then her mind turned. She muttered to herself, "People say sons forget their mothers once they go away." The thought weighed heavy. She sat in silence, lost in it.

Meanwhile, Shyam asked, "So, auntie, did you understand everything?"

His question jolted her back, "Son, you read it well, but tell me, what else did my boy write?"

Shyam didn't catch her tone and grew a little annoyed but kept quiet. He set the card down and began to repeat the message from

memory. Seeing him place it aside, Ramsunnair thought, He must be saying something from himself. She felt uneasy but didn't argue. After all, this was her son's first letter, she didn't want to invite bad luck by quarreling. The next day, she bought a fresh postcard and went to Sohan, who could both read and write. Handing him both cards, she said, "Son, read this one aloud first, then write my reply."

Sohan read the letter carefully, then looked up. Hearing her son's news in full, Ramsunnair's heart swelled with joy. "Now write the letter, son," she said, her voice trembling with affection. Sohan started writing-

Parmanpur

Date: 03.07.2007

Feku,

Blessings.

I'm doing fine here, so don't worry. The house is in order. I fetch a pitcher of water from the schools well every morning, and that lasts the whole day, so there's no shortage of water. For bathing, there's both the stream and the pond. Sometimes we even bathe in the rain. So why worry about such things? You're young; work hard, earn well, and enjoy life a little. Come home next year, we'll arrange your marriage then. The courtyard feels empty without you.

Your mother,

Ramsunnair

A year passed. While Ramsunnair remained absorbed in her daily chores back home, Fekua too became immersed in his work in Delhi. Within a year, he had become a skilled tailor. As he sewed clothes for others, he began to buy his own. By the year's end, his income had grown steady. Life in the village had stayed much the same, but Fekua's had changed. The frail village boy had turned into a confident young man. The rhythm of the sewing machine had filled him with strength. Yet within him, the quiet struggle between the simplicity of village life and the harshness of city life never ceased.

It was Sunday. Both Ratna and Fekua had the day off. Waking up late, they thought of how long it had been since they'd gone home, and how they ought to visit soon. Just then, they noticed police jeeps

rushing up and down the road. The sight stirred unease in them. Ratna went out to get tea and returned with news that chilled them: the previous night, a young woman from their neighbourhood and a wealthy man's son had been kidnapped. The brothers looked at each other, shaken. Their minds turned from play to home, from the noise of the city to the quiet of the fields.

Ratna said, "Boy, it's been a full year. Go home once, meet everyone."

As soon as Ratna mentioned the village, Fekua's mind drifted away into another world. He thought of the brick kiln, the hand pump, the patch of land in front of the house. His memory stopped at the village boundary but could not cross into the courtyard. He imagined his mother standing there on the path. What would she say now? A whole year had passed. He had not sent her even a single rupee or a piece of cloth. When she fell ill, who had brought her medicine? Since the day he sent that one letter, he had not written again.

Worry clouded his mind. What use would another empty letter be? He thought. The old woman must be cursing me, saying her son has gone astray. But what could he do? He could not go home empty-handed; he did not even have enough for the ticket.

Anxiety and sorrow pressed heavily on him. For a while, his thoughts churned like a storm. Then the storm eased, and a faint calm rose within. He thought, the village is the village. There, people survive the bitter cold of Magh by sitting around a fire, the summer heat by resting under trees. But Delhi? Here, a year's earnings disappear just in keeping up with the seasons.

A thin beam of resolve pierced through his gloom, like sunlight through clouds. Turning to Ratna, he said quietly, "Brother, write a letter for me."

Ratna kept everything close at hand. He took out a postcard and got ready to write. Fekua began dictate him.

Delhi

Dated 11.08.2008

Mother, I touch your feet.

You had longed much that your son would find work in Delhi.

But everything is lost. Only one thing remains that will show the way from here, from Delhi back to the village, and that gives me some comfort. My hands are empty. How will I come home?

Fekua.

Four days later the letter reached the mother's hands. The moment she held it, Ramsunnair began to stroke it and look at it again and again. The handwriting was thin and broken, yet seeing it made him imagine that son was his boy alive somewhere. A son is a blessing. May he live safely any where? By now he must have grown into a young man. Just as feasting and ease plump the faces of well-to-do folks, so perhaps Fekua too has had his share of comforts. He must have become fairer in the face, sprouted a moustache and beard. God has snatched her husband and given a son.

At the thought of her grown-up son, Ramsunnair's heart danced with joy. She muttered to her-self, "For ten years there was no grown man in the house, so a man has filled the empty place. Contentment plucks fruit from the tree."

He remembered what had been said the day before: at the tea stall the priest had remarked that the wedding season had started early this year. I will get Fekua married, she decided. As soon as the thought of a wedding came, he pictured all the preparations. I have not even served food to five men in my house for many days; I will do that too. I may not manage a large feast before the whole village, but I will not fall behind where I can afford it. People do not understand that a son born of modest means can also be married with dignity. I will arrange drum, whistling pipe and car too. I will not demand a lot of dowry like others. I will accept what they give to their daughter and son-in-laws. Why should I beg for the man whom I raised and nourished? The man whom I raised and nourished. If she is industrious, I will keep her as a milking cow. If not, she will remain a clay idol.

Suddenly Ramsunnair's gaze fell on the postcard again. She took it out, held it close to her heart and looked at it with reverent longing. She could not make out the broken black letters, yet the dark shape on the card, black as Krishna, was clear enough to the eye.

Ramsunnair left to get the letter read. As soon as she stepped out into the courtyard a thought rose in his mind: does anyone now have to wait twelve years to have a child after the son's marriage Nowadays a child is born in the very first year. Perhaps even my Fekua has become a city man.

At that thought a laugh escaped Ramsunnair's mouth. She spoke loudly as she usually did, as if for others to hear, "Eh! Fusiya's daughter has done shameful act. It is a good luck that she is not beantiful. Otherwise she would have been married long ago. She got a child in the eighth month of marriage. We must thank society that everyone said it was not a full-term baby. If marriage came with such scandal, what would it be like? But that child was not full-term. Still society lied and raised it."

Just then Ramsunnair's gaze fell again on the letter near Rabi's door. Rabi was sitting by the door writing something. Seeing Ramsunnair, Rabi stood up and went to sit on the low bench and asked, "Auntie, when will Feku bhaiya's wedding be? Shall I also go as a guest?"

Hearing Rabi, Ramsunnair's mind drifted to Krishna's rasa-lila in Vrindavan. For a little while he was lost in that vision, then, returning to the letter, he told Rabi to read and write. Rabi read the letter aloud. Getting ready to write its reply, Rabi asked, "What shall I write?"

Ramsunnair began to dictate:

Parmanpur

Dated 15.08.2008

Baua Feku,

I never counted on your earnings. If you have nothing, how will you come to the village? Try and borrow a little and come. We have three mud-heaps of paddy and wheat; I will sell those and send the money. Now you must be sensible. People may charge me with ignomy. I no longer feel comfortable in this world. So I think I should finish my work quickly. Come before the next festival. Then we will arrange a wife for you. I am old now, but what is the fate of this life?

From now on this family and the world will be yours. Come on time and do not leave the work unfinished.

- Mother.

Hearing his mother's letter, Fekua felt a deep surge of joy. For the first time, he thought that even he had a place in this world, in this society.

But the joy did not last. Like the fog of midwinter, his thoughts grew dim. With what face would he return to the village? What would he place in his mother's hands for a year's work? It was true that his mother lived by his name, yet did he truly owe her anything? He whispered to himself, "O God, show me a way."

Fifteen days later something happened. Fekua lost his job. He worked with nine other tailors, but eight of them were old craftsmen who had kept pace with changing times, learning to stitch new designs and experimenting with patterns. Fekua, being a beginner, had to learn everything from the start. Within a year he had somehow become one of Delhi's old-style tailors. But as fashion changed rapidly, he was swept aside. His employer's mind, already greedy for profit, turned dishonest. The reason was money and temptation. An eighteen-year-old girl tailor was found willing to work for two thousand rupees a month.

After living in the city for a year and a quarter, Fekua's dormant sense began to awaken. A strength of self was being born within him, but the struggle was harsh. The moment his employer mentioned dismissal, Fekua demanded his dues. He collected his wages and left for his lodging. There was still some money left. On the way he drank a cup of coffee and went home. Arriving there, he turned on the fan, lay down, and drifted into half-sleep.

As he dozed, his mind wandered. This is the city, not the village. In the city everything changes fast, machines, fashion, even the rhythm of life. What place do fools like me have here when even the educated are shaken awake at every turn? New machines push out old engineers, new ideas drive out old wisdom. But who can tell right from wrong now? Everyone has gone blind chasing luxury and pleasure. My God, these are signs of an earthquake in human life

itself.

Fekua feared that once he lost the job his head might swell with pride. Yet his mind was restless. Oh, how easily I get carried away by other things, he thought. Those who must endure will learn to breathe, so what has that to do with me. When trouble strikes, people clutch their heads and shout for help.

Then another thought came. I too have become like a crooked plough. On one side dogs gnaw and gnash at it, on the other side hunters beat it with sticks. I did not learn the village craft, I learned the city's tricks. So let it be. Fill the sacks by the quintal and take them away.

Fekua's heart began to swell. He felt lost in confusion. There remained only a few paltry things. A heat of anger rose against his mother. He muttered to himself, "This old woman is mad to tell me to come now before the festival, to have my marriage arranged. She says she will find a wife and get me married."

On one side the changing face of the woman he barely knew unsettled him, on the other side his mother's love, like the ocean, made his heart unstable. He thought that his mother had never thought ill of him, nor had she ever neglected him, and it would be wrong to look at her reproachfully. Tomorrow I will go to the village, he decided. I will get married. I, accompanied by my wife, will work together to do something positive in life.

Forsaking the hope of earning two paise, Fekua caught the evening train and reached the village on the third day. ❑

The Wage-Earning Woman, Marni

☰

The small village of Chhatoni was simple and quiet. Only three castes lived there. The settlement itself was small, just a cluster of huts. It was a village of sharecroppers and farmhands. Yet the neighbouring villages never considered Chhatoni a "prestigious" place, because, in their eyes, only that village was truly respectable where people of all thirty-six castes lived, so that every kind of social and occupational need could be met within it. Chhatoni, having only three castes, could be a revenue village, but not one of prestige.

The people of Chhatoni, however, never accepted this view. They would say with pride: Ever since our village was formed, we have never had a quarrel among ourselves. No fights, no cases, no police trouble. Though we belong to three different castes, we live together in harmony, eat and drink together, sit side by side at feasts, and take part in each other's worships. We share the same offerings of the gods and work together in the same fields. In times of hardship or crisis, we stand by one another. People of other villages may not recognize Chhatoni as a proper village, but that is because they are outsiders. Our forefathers have lived here from ancient times.

The people of Chhatoni were not always landless labourers. Once they too owned their own fields and farms. How did those lands slip away? The old men and women of Chhatoni tell the story: during the years of drought, our ancestors could not pay the remaining land tax to the Darbhanga estate on time. The land was auctioned off, and some men of Awadh and Chapra bought it with ready cash. From then on, our ownership ended. Those Awadhiyas and Chapariyas were already employed under the Darbhanga landlords; after taking over our lands, they became the local headmen and panchayat leaders, managing everything as they wished. But they were shrewd: like the

British who seized power and stayed on, they too did not leave. They settled here like the old Mughals, firmly planting themselves in this soil.

Since independence and the scramble for power began, no political leader has ever come to Chhatoni asking for votes, and not once has a polling list been posted here. That is because no polling booth has ever been set up in Chhatoni. Why would politicians come, then? There are no roads here for four-wheeled cars, no public places such as a school or a hospital where speeches and rallies could be held. In villages where booths are set up, the villagers simply carry Chhatoni's votes away with them.

Life in Chhatoni is small and spare. People do not trouble themselves with schooling, they do not worry about thieves, and they do not fall prey to panics over epidemics. The villagers say that whoever has learning written on his brow will learn it somehow, even if he dies trying. Who, then, will go about stealing? For sickness and misfortune there are prayers, rituals, and exorcisms. Above all, they believe that whoever is meant to live on this earth will live; water, rock, or heat cannot wreck a person who is fated to stay. Whoever is not meant to live will be taken, perhaps by a snake on a flowering tree, and die.

Do the people of Chhatoni not believe in God? Of course, they do. If they did not, would they make such a show of worship at the temple once every year? Would they build small family shrines in their courtyards? Would they, year after year, carry offerings and make the pilgrimage to Baijnath?

Despite every lack, the people of Chhatoni live with laughter and contentment. If someone dies in the village, if a snake bites, or if fire breaks out, everyone drops everything and rushes to help.

Marni, now fifty, is one of them. With her own eyes she saw her husband, her son, and her daughter-in-law die beneath a tree, their blood running out onto the earth. Today the poor woman lives between a five-year-old grandson and an eight-year-old granddaughter, holding on to hope. She is a dark, gaunt figure, a single bone wrapped in skin. Her hair sticks up like a bird's tuft on a palm trunk. Her teeth are a few yellow stubs. Her nose is cracked like

the rim of a broken pot. Her eyes are large and bovine. Her sari is faded and patched. After her second marriage blouse tore long ago she never had the luck to get another. She goes about wrapped only in a thin half-sari with no proper covering.

This is Marni. She tills the soil, she bears her losses, and she still breathes.

Four years ago, Subadh, Manohar, and Taunki went to transplant rice. Until Taunki's second child was born, Marni herself used to go with her husband and son, Subadh and Manohar, to the fields for transplanting, harvesting, and every other kind of fieldwork, from the kharif to the Rabi crops. Taunki would stay home and manage the courtyard work. But once the two grandchildren were born, Marni began staying back to manage the household. And the courtyard had no shortage of work: cooking, feeding the grandchildren, tending to the calf tied near the post, everything. Like other families, Marni's too was full and busy.

Ten bundles of paddy seedlings had been tied. Subadh and Manohar pulled up three pairs of seedlings each and hung them on the edge of the paddy ridge, while Taunki, after gathering the old straw into a rope, tied up the seedling bundles, balanced them on her head, and carried them to the clay field. The field had already been watered the previous day, so the three were happy that they would finish transplanting early in the morning. Usually clay work took longer.

Subadh thought to himself that if time allowed, they would even plant the small plot of their own land nearby by hand before noon.

After placing the seedlings in the quagmire, Subadh sat on the ridge and began rolling tobacco. Manohar and Taunki spread the seedlings evenly in the field. Soon the field was covered with seedlings, and Subadh finished his tobacco. Each of the three opened a bundle of seedlings, spread them out, and took a handful in the left hand. From west to east they began: Taunki on the west side, Manohar in the middle, and Subadh on the east, their lines moving steadily forward.

They had just finished one row and begun another when they saw a small patch of dark cloud rising in the east. But the cloud

looked too small to bring rain, so no one paid much attention.

A light breeze began to blow. As the wind grew stronger, the dark cloud rose higher, drifting upward and merging with other clouds. Still, the western sky glowed with sunlight. A little later the sun disappeared behind the clouds. The wind picked up. Lightning flashed. Drops of rain began to fall. The denser the clouds grew, the harder the rain beat down. Lightning flared again and again, and within moments a heavy downpour had begun.

They ran, soaked to the skin, to the mango tree. A field's width away from the paddy, the mango stood, thick with branches. Two main limbs rose four spans above them. A large, ripe mango hung there. In the tree's shade Taunki sat on the west side, Subadh and Manohar on the east. Taunki wrapped her sari around herself, folded her hands into fists and hugged them to her chest. Subadh and Manohar were nearly naked, only the ends of their towels tied around their waists. Even so, the cold made the two men shiver. Damp drops slipped down their bodies. They stood dumb and motionless, forgetting the ache in every bone. What could they do? There was no remedy. The sky to the west darkened and rain began to fall, spreading the downpour far and wide. The clouds kept rumbling and lightning flashed. Once the lightning struck with a fierce glare. At another flash the light took on a different hue, at another it flared red in little bursts.

Since morning Taunki seethed inside, cursing the gods as she muttered that now was the worst possible hour for work. What use is this rain now? She compared the gods to a fickle rich man who lights lamps as he pleases. These capricious gods make a mockery of human toil. People say the gods and ancestors have great eyes and watch the whole world from one place. Where have those eyes gone now? The deities seem bent on testing the poor and powerless. For a labourer or a tiller there are only two good hours to work, early morning and midday. If, during the early-morning transplanting, rain falls at eleven or some other mishap comes, the courtyard will still give some seed. If the rain pours in full, then little can be saved. That is how things run here. These capricious gods appear to favour the fields while the seed is in the ground.

Shivering from the cold, Subadh said to Manohar, “We thought we might be delayed in planting tomorrow and so could not finish our own small patch. If we had finished early this morning we would have planted our homestead plot as well. Now everything is ruined. Who knows when the water will ease and when it will not?”

The two men were still talking when lightning suddenly struck the very tree above them. The thunder cracked like the sky itself had split apart. From the point where the two main branches divided, the bolt tore straight down into the earth, splitting the trunk in two. The huge tree fell, each half crashing to a different side. Beneath one half sat Taunki; under the other lay Subadh and Manohar.

The rain stopped. Soon the whole village echoed with shouts, word spread that the mango tree in the field had fallen, struck by lightning. People began running toward the place, a few at first, standing at a distance, staring in fear. The ground and the tree both smelled of smoke and burning. No one dared to go near.

At last, a man named Kariya tied a cloth across his face and moved forward. The smell of burning grew heavier, yet he forced himself on until he reached the roots. The marks of the lightning were clear in both halves of the tree, black and smoldering. As he looked closely, his eyes caught the sight of a leg buried under one half of the tree. He shouted, “Someone’s trapped under here! Come quickly, help me pull them out!”

Hearing Kariya’s cry, people rushed from all sides. Within moments the shapes of three bodies could be seen. Kariya ran home, shouting for tools. By the time help arrived, the three were gone, burned, blood-soaked, lifeless. Still, people began to cut the branches carefully, lifting them piece by piece until the bodies could be freed.

At first no one recognized them; their faces were blackened beyond recognition. Only when someone looked closely did they realize, it was Subadh, Manohar, and Taunki.

Back in the courtyard, Marni was still playing with her grandchildren when Gauriya came running. “Grandmother,” she cried, “Your family has been crushed under the mango tree!”

At those words Marni fell to the ground unconscious. The

children began to scream. Her neighbour Alodhni splashed water on her face until she stirred. When she opened her eyes, Marni began to wail again, tearing at her hair.

Holding the children in her arms, she went with Alodhni to the field. When she reached the fallen tree and saw the three bodies, her cry broke into a wild, unbearable sound. Kariya caught her by the arms and pulled her aside. The villagers tried to console her, speaking softly, but how could her heart rest?

She stood frozen, torn between two worlds, on one side, her dead husband, son, and daughter-in-law; on the other, her small grandchildren. Looking at their faces, a faint, trembling light of hope flickered once more in her eyes.

The Marni of today is not the Marni of four years ago. She has changed. Just as gold glows with a deeper shine after passing through fire, so has Marni's life, tempered by suffering, begun to gleam with quiet strength? Society too has changed in its ways toward her. Some now bring her food, others bring new clothes for her and the children. Whenever a wedding or a village ceremony takes place, someone comes to take Marni along. The same affection that families show to their elders and children now extends to her.

Her own desire to live, and her love for her grandchildren, have filled her with new vitality. For years, the old farming tools had remained in her hands, but now her reach has grown. Along with the sickle, spade, and hoe, she now wields a hammer and chisel too.

Time moved on, and with it the country's pace of development, slow, but moving nonetheless. Roads, bridges, small schools, and health centers began appearing from village to village. Work for the labourers and farmhands increased. Marni learned to dig soil for embankments, break stones, and pound bricks into dust. Idleness began to vanish. The poor too could now hope for a day's wage and a day's meal. Though life did not become prosperous, it began to hold meaning again.

Most of the work was not in Chhatoni itself but in nearby villages, where the men and women of Chhatoni went to earn. And then, fortune turned their way.

A new seven-kilometer paved road, connecting the national highway to the railway station, was planned to pass through Chhatoni. From the moment the villagers heard that the "Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana" would include their path, hope and excitement spread. No one here could imagine owning a bus or truck, but all felt relieved that during the monsoon they would no longer be trapped indoors by mud and floods.

Some did worry aloud. They said that till now they had managed barefoot; on a paved road, glass or bits of iron might pierce their feet. But then they smiled and reasoned that, now with a steadier income, they could at least afford one pair of shoes. The thought itself brought quiet pride. With shoes on their feet and hope in their hearts, they began to walk toward a different kind of life.

The construction of the road under the Prime Minister's rural scheme finally began. Yet the hopes of the labourers were not fulfilled. The moment the earthwork started, trucks and tractors of every colour and kind rolled in. The digging that used to be done by hand was now done by machines. The work went fast, but the farmhands were left without work.

As soon as the soil was laid, the roller came to flatten it. Except for standing and watching, there was nothing for the villagers to do. Men, women, even the elderly stood by the roadside all day, watching the roar and rumble of machines. The old people too came out, but after a while their worries about home drew them back indoors. In just fifteen days, the seven kilometers of road were covered with earth, smooth, white, shining, raised higher than the village huts.

Once the earthen road was ready, huge trucks began to arrive from the brick kilns, unloading their loads. The villagers stared in amazement. Until now, they had only seen six-wheeled trucks, but now ten- and even eighteen-wheeled ones thundered through their village.

In only three days, all seven kilometers were lined with bricks. But laying the bricks was not work that machines could do; it needed human hands. Skilled masons were called in from outside, since no one in Chhatoni had such experience. The contractor was a big one, handling many roads at once. The day the masons arrived, everyone

realized that these men could spread all those bricks in just two days.

But before the laying began, the bricks had to be broken and levelled, and for that labourers were needed. On the first day, the labourers of Chhatoni got work. They started spreading bricks eagerly, full of joy that work had come again. The rhythm of labour filled the place with energy.

Then came the next phase: truckloads of broken bricks and gravel for levelling. Seeing double the work, the villagers' hopes rose higher. They thought they would surely get work breaking stones. But the contractor's clerk, thinking only of profit, fixed a meager rate, just sixty rupees for breaking a tractor-load of gravel.

For a day or two the labourers protested and stayed back, but hunger drove them out again. Even Marni took up the hammer. It took her four days to break one tractor-load of stones, yet what else could she do? The road that had promised hope had, once again, become a test of endurance.

Before this new road, every earlier one had ended up half-finished and neglected. Once the earthwork was done, it would take another year or two just to lay the bricks, and by then the soil would have eroded. The surface would become uneven and full of pits. The third-quality bricks used for paving would break easily, turning into dust. The village women and children would scoop up the broken pieces and throw them into nearby fields. Some women would even carry the good bricks home to use for flooring their huts. But this time, it was different. The contractor had promised to finish the road within two months, before the rains set in.

Marni was fifty now, though she looked much older. Her bones clicked audibly with every movement. Her face had sunk like a cracked earthen pot. Years of chewing tobacco had broken her front teeth. Her hair–grey, brown, and tangled–fluttered in the wind. She bathed daily in the dust of the roadwork, yet her eyes never lost their brightness. When the east wind blew, she turned westward and hammered stones; when the west wind rose, she turned eastward. Between bouts of work she rested a little, took a pinch of tobacco, and went back to striking the stones. Her face never fell, for in her heart there was fierce endurance and in her mind an unshaken faith. That

kept her spirit smiling.

It was early morning, around nine. Marni faced east, breaking stones. Nearby came Sugiya, a woman of twenty-five or thirty, bare-headed, wearing a shiny red Banarasi sari and a matching blouse. Her hair was twisted in a stylish bun, a tuft curling down her neck. She wore socks and heeled slippers, and her lips were red with betel juice. In one hand she carried a plastic bag with packets of salt, a small bottle of mustard oil, sachets of spices, and a bar of soap. Standing close, she watched Marni's work–the strength in her arms, the rhythm of her blows–and a quiet smile spread across her face.

Marni was lost in her stone-breaking, working with all her might. Sugiya felt a laugh of pleasure rise in her throat, but she kept her mouth closed because her betel quid stained her lips. She needed to spit. Sitting on the pile of bricks where Marni was breaking stone, Sugiya spat. A couple of wet droplets fell on Marni's body. Marni jumped and stared. The fresh spit gleamed. For a moment Marni's eyes went straight to Sugiya's face. Seeing Sugiya chew her betel made a fire flare up in Marni's chest. She looked at the heap and saw that the whole pile was spattered with spit. How could she go on breaking stones now, with the pile and her body both smeared?

With a hot look Marni said, "Go on, girl, did you not think before spitting on the pile?"

Sugiya, affronted, answered roughly, "What are you ordering me for? Do you think I will not spit?"

Marni replied steadily, "There is plenty of space. Was there nowhere else for you to spit that you had to do it here?"

Sugiya shot back, "If I spat here, what are you going to do about it?"

Marni said, "Do you not have shame? You shameless creature, you have no honour left like the seven ancestors' noses and ears that your family cut away. You will carry your family's name in this manner."

Sugiya snapped, "Look at yourself first."

Marni answered, "What should I show you? This is the body of a farm labourer. What would I do, buy boys the way you do, from

here or from Delhi? I would not drown myself in one handfnl of water and die. You have an affair with a number of men. You cannot be like me in seven births. A man once held my hand and brought me into his house. I live there with all my sweat. You should burn your flaunting body."

Marni's words stung Sugiya into silence. Fear prickled through her. She hurried away with her mouth drawn in. Watching her go, Marni took a piece of tobacco from the hook of her sari and began rolling it. Still her mind would not settle. She lifted her head and glanced at Sugiya again, thinking to herself, "What a posture she carries! She looks like the wife of a king, like a queen or a noblewoman. She cannot earn livelihood if she were disabled. Both boys and girls indulge in adultery."

Marni was breaking stones when her grandson came running, shouting, "Grandma, Grandma!" He caught her by both shoulders and clung to her back. His little sister followed soon after. Marni lifted the boy in her arms, kissed his cheek and said to the girl, "Dai, you didn't give your brother any bread? Go, both of you, there's bread wrapped in my cloth. Take it and eat together. I'm still working. I'll come soon and cook."

The children ran back toward the courtyard. Marni turned east again and began striking the stones with her hammer.

A little later, the road contractor came walking from the north toward the south, inspecting the work, followed by four armed guards. He walked ahead, the guards just behind him. As soon as his eyes fell on Marni, his steps began to slow. He kept walking, but his gaze stayed fixed on her. Something stirred inside him; his heart grew restless. A thought rose in his mind that the woman whose labour built this road was the same kind of person whose sweat and strength kept the country alive. Her earnings were barely enough for food, yet men like him lived in comfort and pride on the fruits of her toil. The thought troubled him, though he continued walking forward.

After a few steps, he felt as if something within him stopped him. He halted in the middle of the road, turned to one of his guards, and said, "Go and call that woman who's breaking stones."

The guard went up to Marni and said, "The sahib is calling you.

Please come.”

Marni looked up from her work, puzzled. For a moment she wondered, “What could this be about? I haven’t done anything wrong, haven’t borrowed any money, haven’t quarrelled with anyone. Why would a guard be calling me?”

She steadied herself and replied, “Can’t you see I’m working? I won’t leave my work for anyone else’s orders. Tell your sahib to come when I’m done.”

Both the guard and the contractor heard her words clearly. They looked at each other and lowered their eyes. The contractor’s heart trembled like a peepal leaf, torn between shame and admiration. He thought, if the workers of this country can have such faith in their labour, and still the nation struggles to grow, then the fault must lie somewhere else, among those who rule and manage it.

The thought struck him hard. When he turned away from Marni, he felt as though his own guilt was standing there before him, silent and unmovable.

The guard barked at Marni, “If you won’t go, shall I drag you there myself?”

Marni looked up and said calmly, “What debt do I owe you that you’d drag me off? I work with my own hands and eat from what I earn.”

Her words shook the guard. He stood there, caught between his master’s order and the quiet strength of this old woman’s voice. How could someone so poor speak with such fearlessness? Most people he’d seen trembled at the sight of a uniform, even when the man inside it had no power. Yet this frail labourer, who owned nothing, stood unafraid.

He thought: I may wear a uniform, but I’m only a servant. She, on the other hand, is free, an independent worker of an independent land, the real foundation of this nation.

The contractor, watching from behind, came forward. Everyone looked at Marni, and Marni too stared at the contractor. He fixed his eyes on her. What he saw startled him: a face worn by years of toil, yet her eyes glowed like the sun. From her brow radiated an

unshakable confidence.

In a gentle voice, he asked, “Auntie, who all are in your family?”

Tears welled in Marni’s eyes. Memories of her husband, son, and daughter-in-law flashed before her. Wiping her tears with the edge of her sari, she replied, “My husband, my son, and my daughter-in-law all died when the lightning struck the tree. Now it’s just me, and two little ones, my grandson and granddaughter.”

The contractor asked softly, “Do the children go to school?”

“No,” she said. “There’s no school in our village. And even if there were, poor people’s children must fill their stomachs first. When there isn’t enough food, or proper clothes, or even a roof to live under, how can they go to school?”

Her words struck him hard. What he saw before his eyes couldn’t possibly be false: a woman doing heavy labour in tattered black cloth, her frail body still lifting the hammer day after day. Her age belonged to rest, not to such hardship.

The contractor felt something inside him tear open. Between heaven and earth lies the horizon, where light and darkness meet. His mind trembled in that very place. For a moment, everything went still. He could neither look forward nor back. Finding strength, he finally asked, “How much do you earn in a day?”

Marni’s eyes flashed, “How much can we earn? The government cheats, and so do its men. It takes me four days to break one tractor-load of gravel, and I get only thirty or forty rupees. Can that fill three bellies? After a whole day of breaking stones, my arms ache, my hands swell, and I still don’t have enough to purchase even a tablet for relief.”

Tears filled the contractor’s eyes. Humanity stirred within him. But he knew this feeling would not last long. The world was built upside down, and life itself had become a knot too tight to loosen. ❑

Defeat and Victory

☰

Four days before, Soman and his wife decided that living in the village had become impossible. It would be better to leave. The world was wide; wherever they could make a living, they would stay.

They tied up their few belongings, pressed a stone to their hearts, and prepared to go. With hungry stomachs, dry mouths, and eyes streaming with tears, they sat in the courtyard unable to rise. The world looked dark. Courage failed them

Soman kept thinking what they had once been and what they had now become. Thoughts rose and vanished in his mind like bubbles in water. The bundle lay packed before them, yet they sat motionless like soldiers struck by bullets, writhing on the ground, sinking and rising in a sea of sorrow. Morning had turned to noon.

This was the village of Maircha in Saharsa district. From the east, the Kosi River had begun to devour the fields. The people were frightened and scattered in all directions. The government arranged for rehabilitation beyond the eastern embankment, but what could that mean to farmers? Their land, their work, their means of living, all were already lost.

Phulchand Pandit too left the village with his wife, son, and daughter-in-law, walking westward. He had no land left, no property of any kind, but he carried with him the knowledge of his trade. That gave him some strength. His only worry was finding a place to settle. At times he thought of his old village, its known faces and familiar paths, and wondered what the new place would be like. But what choice was there? To live, a man must try everything.

About a mile west of the embankment he caught sight of it again. Hope stirred within him. There was no river beyond that side.

Smiling faintly, Phulchand turned to his wife and said, “Do you remember the story of Lord Ram?”

Looking at his face, Munia replied, “I heard it long ago. I don’t remember much now.”

Phulchand further said, “Just as we are leaving our village, so had they. We can at least manage some pocket money, but they had nothing at all.”

Meanwhile Phulchand’s daughter-in-law Kapli caught hold of her mother-in-law’s arm, turned her around and said, “The heel has been cut. It is bleeding. Sit down somewhere for a while so that I can bandage it.”

Seeing the wound, Munia said, “Child, is there not even a tree anywhere where you could rest a little? My throat is dry from thirst as well.”

Hearing the two of them, Phulchand said, “Child, it seems fate has struck us. All we can do is keep walking until we reach some kind of shelter. The sun is already burning; the longer we stop, the worse the heat will feel.”

When they reached the embankment they all gasped for breath. Behind the embankment stood a mango tree. Seeking its shade, everyone made their way to it. A traveller was already lying down there with his mat spread. After a short rest, Phulchand asked the traveller, “Brother, do you take tobacco?”

The traveller, taking the lime-box from his pocket and tossing it before Phulchand, asked, “Which village are you going to?”

At the question “Which village are you going to?” Phulchand’s heart froze. He answered in a trembling voice, “Brother, we do not have a fixed destination. We came from Maircha. The village is being cut away by the current, so we are leaving. If there is a village without a potter, we will settle there.”

At the name “potter” the traveller sat up and said, “There is no potter in my village either. Come, stay in my village with us.”

Hearing this, Soman asked, “How far is your village from here?”

“Two and a half miles. I too am from this area and am returning

to my village."

They set off again, and the five of them went their way. When they reached Lachhmipur the traveller Ratiilal said to Phulchand, "Brother, this is my village."

Seeing the groves and bamboo clumps, Phulchand Pandit felt quietly happy. He thought to himself that there would never be any shortage of firewood here. As they entered the village, he saw two large ponds spread over several bighas of land and felt certain that even if nothing else was found, water would never be lacking. Everyone stopped near the pond while Ratiilal walked ahead.

As travelling performers (nut-kichak) attract children wherever they go, the same happened here. The children of the village began to gather, curious to see the newcomers. The news spread quickly that a potter had arrived in the village. After a while, Phulchand Pandit held his son's hand and said, "Soman, you all stay here. I'll go and meet the elders of the village."

Saying this, Phulchand went toward the houses. It was the bright fortnight, so even after sunset the light was clear as day. Before he could return, fifteen or twenty young men of the village had already reached the edge of the pond. Their hearts were filled with excitement. The village had long suffered from the absence of a potter, and now that need was finally to be fulfilled. Just as the arrival of a long-awaited necessity brings joy, the people felt happy that a potter had come.

A few plots of fallow land lay three kathas away from the pond. The young men decided that the potter should be settled there. By the time Phulchand returned, both father and son were inspecting the land. Seeing the open space, Soman said to his father, "It is a suitable place for the settlement of a potter, though there might be some trouble getting drinking water."

Phulchand replied, "There will be no problem. We can dig a well ourselves, and I know how to build a platform around it. There will be no shortage then."

The villagers agreed. The young men went off to cut bamboo. Each contributed what he could, and soon twenty-five good bamboos

were collected. Phulchand and his son helped alongside. Everyone worked with his hands. By midnight, a thirteen-hand-long house stood ready.

When dawn came, father and son sat together in thought. It was a new village and a new dwelling, and there was a great deal to do. Everything had to be done with care. Though the house was not yet fully built, at least they had a roof over their heads. Now they would have to begin the real work, from arranging the courtyard to setting up their trade.

Phulchand asked Soman, “Son, what things have you brought from Maircha?”

Soman replied, “Father, I knew that everything couldnot be found right away in a new village, so I brought the stone for the potter’s wheel, the plank, the board, the peg, and the bel-wood nails, everything that would be needed.”

Phulchand smiled with joy, “Very good. You have brought the base for the wheel itself. What else did you bring?”

Encouraged by his father’s happiness, Soman continued, “I also brought the clay press, the hand-mould, the hammer, the stool, the frame, and the sieve.”

Phulchand laughed softly, “Then everything for work is here. Today we’ll start setting up the wheel. One of you fetch some straw, another help smooth the floor of the house, and I’ll spend the day arranging the tools.”

After ten days of steady labour, a small house for living was complete. The clay for the wheel had dried, and the kiln area was ready. Soman fixed the wheel, kneaded the clay, and sat down to work. The joy that fills an industrialist at the inauguration of a new factory filled the hearts of Phulchand and his wife that day.

Smiling, Phulchand looked at his son and said, “Soman, make everything you know how to make. Shape it, bake it, and spread it out in the field. Then we’ll invite the entire village to see. This is the real test of life.”

Soon the yard was filled with rows of freshly made pots and vessels, pitchers, jars, lids, lamps, figures of Pandavas, Ganesh and

Lakshmi, ritual pots for Sama-Chakeba and other festivals, small toys, milk-pots, incense holders, cooking pans, and countless other household items. Each kind was arranged separately for different uses, festivals, weddings, sacred rituals, funerals, ponds worship, and daily needs.

When everything was ready, father and son went to the village to call the people and show them their work.

All four members of Phulchand's family had no idea how many items he had made. He had never before shaped everything at once. But today he had made them all together. Seeing the variety spread before them, everyone in the village believed that this was no ordinary potter's work. It looked like the shop of a great merchant where every kind of ware could be found.

Time passed. As the years went on, Phulchand and his wife grew old and weak. Soman and his wife had a son and a daughter. The family grew, and so did their expenses. Life kept moving forward. One day, both Phulchand and his wife passed away.

Soman married off his daughter. His son, Ramdat, went to his maternal home to see the Durga Puja and did not return. Gradually, clay utensils began to disappear from the household, replaced by metal ones. As the use of earthen pots declined, their demand too began to fade. Slowly, the craft itself vanished, remaining only in rituals, festivals, weddings, thread ceremonies, and funeral offerings.

Watching his shrinking trade and weakening family, Soman grew anxious. The days ahead seemed dark, without direction. Then one day his eyes fell upon a pile of roof tiles lying nearby. A thought came to him, and smiling, he said to his wife, "There is one fine kind of work, where the earning is good, and it still uses clay."

Startled, Kapli asked, "What kind of work?"

"Making roof tiles," said Som.

For a while she sat silent, then said, "I can shape the flat tiles, but what about the curved ones?"

Soman answered firmly, "Yes, they can be made too, not on the wheel, but easily on the wooden mould."

"Yes," she said, "that can be done."

The two of them began making tiles. At first, no one paid attention. But when they built a kiln and fired the first batch, the villagers came to see. The tiles were smooth and strong, their colour perfect. Soon Soman began to sell them by count. The work grew, and with it, their earnings.

Their business prospered for a while. But when the lighter asbestos sheets arrived, the demand for earthen tiles began to fall. For tile-makers like Soman, hard times returned. His family was small, just the two of them, yet even meeting daily needs became difficult. Life, once filled with laughter and contentment, grew heavy again.

Evenings came when the hearth no longer burned. There was no other trade to turn to. Watching their fading days, Kapli looked at her husband and said, "How long will we go on living like this? We still have the strength in our hands and feet, and the will to work. Is the boundary of this village the end of the world? Let's leave this place."

Hearing her, Soman's eyes were filled with tears. He could not speak. In his heart he felt the pain that the one skill which had sustained their lives till now was dying away. He had no other craft to rely on. What could he do? Lost in confusion, he sat silent.

Seeing his face, Kapli said, "The world is vast. Wherever we can fill our stomachs, we'll live. Just as we once left Maircha and stayed all these years in Lachhmipur, we'll leave this village and settle somewhere else."

Agreeing with her, Soman said, "You are right. We will leave in four days. In the two days before that, let us visit everyone in the village and tell them ourselves. We came here with joy and open hearts, so we must not leave in silence. Only those who leave work half-done slip away quietly."

Over the next two days, the couple went door to door through the village, greeting everyone and saying, "We are leaving."

When dawn came, they tied their belongings into bundles and placed them in the courtyard. Their stomachs were empty, their mouths dry, their hearts weighed down with despair. They sat there, looking at each other in silence, their eyes wet with tears. Their hearts

ached as though being torn apart.

The noon sun blazed overhead. The air was still, the sky spotless. Sweat poured down Soman's son, Ramdat, as he walked into the courtyard, a bundle on his head and a V.I.P. bag in his hand. Seeing the state of his parents, his chest trembled. He stood before them like a stunned guest at a funeral. Both sat with their eyes closed, tears seeping down their cheeks.

Steadying his voice, Ramdat said softly, "Babu."

At the sound of that word, Soman's eyes fluttered open. Tears still flowed, but their meaning had changed. The grief that had been spilling all this time now turned into tenderness. Soman murmured, startled, "My son!"

In that very moment, Kapli jolted up, her voice breaking into syllables, "My boy!"

Ramdat placed his bag and bundle on the veranda, bent down, and touched his father's feet. Kapli rose quickly, grasped his hands, kissed them again and again, and said, "How blessed we are, my son, that we met. Who knows where you might have been and where we would have ended up!"

Ramdat touched his mother's feet too, then opened his bundle. He took out a packet of two kilos of rasgullas, a kilo of cutlets, and a kilo of Bikaneri bhujia, and slid them carefully toward his parents.

The two hungry souls, Soman and Kapli, watched in silence, their eyes fixed on the sweets and savories as a calf stares at its mother's udder. Their faces showed both hunger and wonder.

Then Ramdat took out new clothes for them, laying them neatly beside the food. From the bag he also brought out shining steel plates, bowls, glasses, and a kettle for tea, along with cups, a sieve, an iron, and a small tin of coconut oil. He spread out a clean sheet and placed everything in order.

Just as a little water poured on a fire cools its flame, so the hearts of Soman and Kapli cooled as they looked at those things, the coolness of relief, like the calm that follows a bath after days of heat.

Soman's gentle, softened voice came out, "Son, you must be tired and hot. Go bathe first. Then your mind will rest."

Looking at their faces, Ramdat smiled and said, "Babu, I'm hungry too. Let's eat a little first, then I'll bathe."

Ramdat untied the knot of the rasgulla packet, took out two sweets, placed them on a steel plate, and set it before his father. Then he put two on another plate for his mother. Opening the packets of cutlets and bhujia, he said cheerfully, "Eat as much as you like. A bath can wait."

Taking a rasgulla himself, he opened his bag, pulled out his money pouch, and laid it before his father. The sight of the notes made Kapli's heart leap as if she had climbed a mountain. Her feet touched the ground in gratitude.

As they ate, time slipped by. The afternoon sun crossed half the courtyard, its light falling into the western shade of the house. In one corner lay their old straw bed. Kapli pulled it out, spread it on the back veranda, laid a new cotton mat over it, and placed fresh pillows. The three of them sat together and began to talk.

Soman asked, "Son, how did you get lost that day?"

Remembering, Ramdat said, "Babu, I didn't exactly get lost. At Mama's village, three idol-makers from Muzaffarpur had come to make the Durga image. They were potters too. Their youngest boy was about my age, and we became friends. I went off with them."

Kapli interrupted, "Oh, my dear boy, why didn't you ever send a letter?"

Feeling a pang of remorse, Ramdat said, "Ma, I got so absorbed in learning the craft that I forgot everything. I thought you both must be doing well, so I didn't worry."

Trying to ease the moment, Soman said quietly, "Whatever sorrow was written for us, we have lived through it. Such is God's play, sometimes sorrow, sometimes joy."

Ramdat asked softly, "Babu, how did things become so bad?"

Hearing this, Soman's eyes were filled with tears. He replied, "Son, all the skills and knowledge we once had have grown old. We never learned anything new."

Hearing his father's words, Ramdat sighed deeply and smiled. "Babu, I hardly get any rest now. I earn twenty thousand rupees a

month, sometimes more. There's always a line of people waiting for me to make their idols."

Kapli asked softly, "Son, what all can you make?"

Smiling again, Ramdat replied, "Ma, I can make idols from clay all the way to plaster. I also know how to paint, decorate stage curtains, and draw pictures for walls and temples."

Hearing this, Soman's pride stirred within him. "Son," he said, "when you have such skills and good earnings, why do you still work for others?"

Ramdat smiled, "The work I did these past years was not really service. The first year went in learning how to knead clay, the next in shaping frames and drying, the third in sculpting the forms, and the fourth in painting their eyes. This fifth year I offered my guru dakshina. Now I'll start my own work. Once I set up my own workshop, I'll also take students and teach them."

Soman looked at him tenderly, "Son, I've worried for you more than my own body could bear. I always feared that our family line would end. As long as we both live, that fear has haunted me. But now I am at peace. As long as a shoot climbs the bamboo, the count of nodes increases, yet when it bends downward, it starts to dry. Today I see hope again that our line will rise from one to twenty-one."

Finding his son an artist of a new age, Soman's heart was filled with joy. His eyes lingered on the boy's face, glowing with pride. His thoughts wandered among growing bamboo shoots. In his mind came a quiet resolve, to learn from his son's craft, to work once more while life remained within them. ❑

The Cart-Puller

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When the clock in the tower struck twelve, Bhola's sleep broke. Rising from his cot, he stepped onto the road. The three stars popularly called weighing pole and scale (dandi-taraju) leaned slightly westward. The constellation of seven stars (satbhaiyan) remained invisible under the clouds. Where the sky was clear, the stars smiled; where the clouds hung, they looked dim. No vehicles, no passengers. The road lay deserted under the quiet spread of electric light. A patrolling constable walked slowly along the street.

Bhola returned to his bed, but his mind would not rest. Memories from his past flickered through his thoughts like frames of an old film reel. His joy rose like water boiling in a pot, spilling over the edge of his heart and flying into the night like a bird. Why would he not be happy? What was lost had been found again. His thoughts drifted to the letter received the day before, the one from his village which both his sons had sent. The matter seemed impossible, almost beyond belief.

He had not read the letter himself, but he could still see every line the reader had spoken. Opening the letter again, his eyes fixed on the words: "Babu, on the fifth, both of us brothers will join our jobs. Before leaving home, we wish to touch your feet and take your blessings. So, please reach the village by ten in the morning on the fifth."

The words brought him to the edge of memory, the boundary between his village and the city. He thought, I left society behind, and by pulling this cart with my chest, I have given that society two teachers. Does that society still hold some debt against me? If not, why do I still feel this weight pressing on my heart?

He remembered the day he had left home with only a rolled dhoti, a shirt, and two rupees in his pocket. Now, after all these years, he would leave this place with nothing more than the clothes on his body and the faint scent of tea and toil upon him.

The sparrow chirped. Bhola rose from his cot and stepped outside. The dawn had begun to spread; a faint glow hovered just above the bamboo tops. He took a short round of the lanes, woke up his friends, and divided everything he owned among them. For himself, he kept only seven rupees, just enough for fare, food, and a few small expenses. Dressed neatly, he touched the threshold of the dharamshala in reverence, smiled, and set out on his way.

When Bhola was eight, his mother had died. Three months later, his father married a woman, kissing him for the last time. From his father's first wife, Raghuni had four children, but only little Bhola had survived. The second wife, the stepmother, might have easily turned cruel, as people in the village predicted. They whispered that she would either drive Bhola out or force the family to divide. But everyone was proven wrong. Bhola's life under her care was peaceful. She nourished him with love.

Every evening, when the meal was ready, she would break her bread and place Bhola's share neatly on a leaf plate, setting it aside on a bamboo peg. Bhola often ate his day's food in the evening, and the evening's food in the morning, but he was never left hungry.

In the surrounding area, the dance troupes of Jalim Singh and Uttamchand were in full swing. Though not every village had its own troupe, whenever one performed, people would gather from miles around to watch.

Bhola's village troupe was considered the finest of all. Their drummers and singers were unmatched, and the fame of their performances spread farther each season.

Once Bhola was free from family duties, he became a regular spectator at the village naach (folk dance). The performances were never short. Sometimes they lasted an hour or two, sometimes the entire night until dawn. The dancers were as determined as the audience was eager. From the elders to the young boys, everyone enjoyed it wholeheartedly. The entertainment was simple and free.

The troupe took no money, and there was no fuss about food or drink.

Most of the villagers lived poor lives, hardly able to make ends meet. Yet the farming families made sure to organize a naach once or twice a month in their courtyards. They fed the performers well and often gave them small gifts. Bhola soon became a member of one such troupe and was given charge of the stage arrangements.

The work suited him, and he threw himself into it completely. He arranged the lights, fixed the mats, and kept the place in order. But his heart did not find rest even in that. Bhola began to create small innovations of his own. He watched the children sitting near the stage, clapping and laughing, and kept an eye on them. He never sat still anymore, moving around constantly, making sure everything went well. His responsibilities grew with time. He began lighting beedis for the dancers and, little by little, learned to smoke himself.

Within a few days, Bhola became fond of beedi. Even if he took just a puff or two each time, by the end of the night it would be thirty or thirty-five puffs. It kept his mood alive through the long nights of music and dance.

But soon the pull of the beedi became a habit. At night he smoked freely with the performers, but during the day, when the craving rose, his mind grew restless and his mood heavy. To ease it, Bhola began stealing beedis from his father's old stock, and almost every day he was caught and beaten.

One day, only one beedi remained in Raghuni's packet. Bhola stole it. When Raghuni returned from the fields, he wanted a smoke, but the packet was empty. Searching around, he soon caught Bhola. All his anger burst forth on the boy.

Crying and bruised, Bhola ran out of the house along the northern path. A little ahead, old Kariya Kaka saw him. From the look on Bhola's face and his trembling lips, he understood that the boy had been beaten. Softly, he called out, "What happened, Bhola? Why are you shaking like this?"

Kariya Kaka's affection calmed Bhola for a moment, then he began to sob and hiccup. Between sobs he tried to tell the old man something, but his words got lost in his crying. Kaka did not scold

him. Instead he seized Bhola by the right ear and went straight to tell Raghuni.

Seeing Kaka, Raghuni's heart softened. Kaka stepped up and said, "Raghuni, Bhola is only a child and not yet married. It would be better to get him married. That will lift a burden from you. The family's load will lessen and you will be at ease. If you keep hitting him now you will be blamed. People will gossip that the father is cruel. To shut them up they will say, 'the mother died and the father is heartless.'"

Kariya Kaka's words pierced Raghuni's heart. Tears rose in bis eyes. His gaze, which had been fixed on Kariya Kaka, shifted and became riveted on the dry streaks of tears on Bhola's cheek. The beating had left marks on Bhola's body, yet at the mention of marriage a small happiness also stirred in him. By any sensible measure Bhola was a foolish boy, but he did sing the mixed male and female songs at the performances.

Speaking as head of the household, Raghuni turned to Kariya Kaka and said, "Uncle, I do not know much about arranging such things. Tomorrow go and find a suitable girl and fix the match."

"Very well," Kaka said, and set off down the road.

Eight days after Bhola's wedding, five men came together and told Raghuni, "Before the marriage we all agreed, but the day before yesterday we learned that the boy works with the dance troupe. We will not let our daughter go with a performer. This relationship cannot remain. We are offended. Get your son married to someone else and we will arrange another match for our daughter." With that the five men left.

Hearing his father-in-law's words, Bhola's mind went blank. It was as if a sudden gust had swept through him, leaving everything in darkness. The world seemed to lose its light.

Three months earlier, the dance troupe had already broken up. One of the performers had run away with a girl, splitting the village into two factions. The news spread like fire, and Bhola too was caught in the storm, divided between shame and despair. His body began to grow pale, his strength draining away like blood from a sick man. But

what could he do? He was helpless. His mind burned with guilt and self-reproach. He cursed his own birth, what sin had he committed to deserve being abandoned even by his wife?

At last, he decided to leave the village. His friends often talked about Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay. From their stories he knew a little about trains. But he had no money for travel, only two rupees in his pocket. Still, he made up his mind and boarded a train to Calcutta.

When the train reached Howrah station, Bhola got down. He had no ticket, but not an ounce of fear in him. Between Nirmali and Sakri he had never bought a ticket. Once, on Independence Day, he had even gone as far as Simaria without one.

At the platform gate, two policemen were standing beside the ticket collector, checking tickets. Seeing Bhola, the ticket collector thought, “He’s a beggar from Darbhanga and has come here to seek alms.” So, he didn’t bother to ask for a ticket. The policemen too guessed that the man had no money. And so, just like any ordinary passenger, Bhola walked calmly through the gate and stepped into Calcutta.

Stepping out onto the road, Bhola looked up and saw tall buildings, wide streets, and a sea of people and vehicles moving in every direction. For a moment he thought something had gone wrong with his eyes. He felt as though his vision had multiplied the world, the way one moon sometimes seems to turn into seven. He rubbed both eyes hard and looked again. The crowd was still there. Then a thought came to him: if so many people could make their living here, why couldn’t he?

He began walking, listening to the voices around him, but he couldn’t understand a single word. Until now, he had believed that just as cows and buffaloes sound the same everywhere, people too must speak alike. But now he realized he was among strangers, that even human speech could sound foreign. For a moment he felt lost, but then he thought, how can a man lose himself when he is alone?

Bhola found himself caught in confusion. He had neither the courage to move forward nor the confidence to ask anyone for help. Disheartened, he turned north and kept walking. On both sides of the road were small food stalls. He was hungry, but with an empty pocket

and strange voices all around, he lacked the nerve to approach. Checking his pocket, he found only two coins. He remembered a small hotel near Madhubani station where a plate of food had cost five rupees. This is Calcutta, he thought. It must be even more expensive here.

He stopped in front of a small shop, thinking that if he couldn't eat a meal, at least he could drink a glass of sattu. The shopkeeper saw him standing there and called out, "Come here, brother, why are you just standing?"

Hearing his own language, Bhola stepped closer and asked, "Dada, how much do you charge for food?"

"Three months ago, it was eight annas," the man said. "Now it's twelve."

Bhola felt comforted. Speaking with the confidence of someone who could afford it, he said, "All right, bring me water to wash my hands."

After eating to his fill, Bhola walked on. He noticed the bright colours around him, but his eyes lingered only on two things: the movie posters pasted along the walls and the handcarts moving down the street. Whenever he saw a poster showing a dancing woman, he wondered whether she was really a woman or a man in disguise. In his village, it was always men who dressed as women to perform. Then he remembered what a friend had once told him, that even in the film Satya Harishchandra, the women's roles had been played by men.

As Bhola walked on humming to himself and, seeing a boy like him pushing a cart, he thought: I could do this work too. He did not know how to drive a handcart and had never learned, but he kept moving forward, restless. Along the roadside he saw a cartman drinking tea and stopped there. He stood and the cartman asked, "Which village are you from?"

"Bishaul," Bhola replied.

The moment the cartman heard "Bishaul," he said, "I too come from the village. Come along with me."

They chatted as they walked and reached an old dharamshala

by the temple. Leaving the cart by the road, the cartman took Bhola inside and said, "Listen, don't wander off anywhere. You'll get lost. Stay here, I'll go make one trip and be back."

Bhola washed his hands at the tank. The cartman gave him a beedi to smoke. Sitting at ease against a pillar, he looked up and saw the crumbling plaster of the walls, and here and there a banyan or pipal tree growing. He noticed a small room and a water tank, and in front of it a heap of plates and kitchenware. The sight reminded him of home. The dance troupe had broken up. His wife had left him. The village had split into two groups. Thinking this, Bhola fell asleep where he sat.

At the sunset Buchai, another cartman came and woke him, asking, "Which village are you from?"

With a voice full of hope Bhola said, "Bishaul."

Hearing the name of Bishaul, Buchai smiled and asked, "Do you know Rupan?"

"He's my uncle," Bhola answered.

Believing Bhola to be kin, Buchai spoke in a friendly way as if establishing a relationship between the two families, "Come, first have some tea, then we'll talk properly."

They went to the tank to wash hands and change clothes. Buchai led Bhola to a shop where he signalled with his eyes and the shopkeeper handed over a plate of sweets and two samosas to each of them. They ate, drank tea, and went to a paan shop. Buchai ordered two paans. Hearing "paan," Bhola said, "Skip the paan, buy me beedis instead."

Smoking their beedis, the two men walked back into the dharamshala. As time passed, more and more cart-pullers returned. When they heard that Bhola was from Bishaul, each one tried to trace a kinship with him. Once these familiar ties were found, tea kept coming round after round. Drinking tea, Bhola felt a warmth rise inside him. Never before in his life had he felt such affection. That day, for the first time, he felt truly among his own. He became part of the cart-pullers' family, and they took care of all his needs. The next day he began pulling a cart himself.

Every Saturday the cart-pullers went to the evening cinema show. There was a concession for their group, and Bhola too started going to the movies every Saturday.

After fourteen months Bhola returned home. He looked different, his face brighter, his thoughts clearer. He brought clothes for every member of the family and gave each child two chocolates. Seeing the chocolates in the children's hands, relatives began to gather. Even old Jhabbri Dadi came. The moment she saw Bhola, she said, "Tell me where you would find a man as fine as this whom that foolish woman left behind."

Her words pierced Bhola's heart. Tears welled up in his eyes, and Raghuni's eyes too grew moist. The next day Raghuni went out to look for a bride for him. There was no shortage of girls, but Raghuni wanted to keep the marriage within the familiar villages. Girls were scarce in that community where the curse of female-fetus killing had spread. Times had changed. Households now preferred sons-in-law with jobs over those who lived by farming.

Bhola's marriage took place in a nearby village. Three days after the wedding, his wife's departure ceremony was held, and on the fifth day Bhola left again for Calcutta. Out of every twelve months, he now spent eleven in Calcutta and one at home. When he came, he not only managed his own household chores but helped others too. By the third year, he had a son. In the ninth month, Bhola came back to the village again, relieved that he would no longer have to worry about money. All the cart-pullers had formed an association to look after each other's needs, and he was one of them. It was his first time as a father, and caring for his wife and child was not easy. There was no government help, but the community was kind and supportive. Because of that, Bhola faced no great hardship.

Five years passed. By then Bhola had enrolled both his sons in school. Living in the city had changed him; his thoughts turned steadily toward their education. He resolved that however hard the work, however the wages rose or fell, he would make sure both boys learned. Using his earnings he even managed to get his wife's operation done, and that steadied the household.

In class Ratan was bright and Lal steady. Ratan took first place,

Lal came second. From the lower grades through seventh, the two brothers held first and second in the school. In high school they chose the arts stream, there were no high distinctions to claim now, but they passed with good marks.

After taking their matriculation exams both the brothers went to Calcutta. Until then they had nourished an idea of living a colourful life. But seeing their father's hard work and pulling the cart with the strength of his chest, they decided to go back to their village. They restrained their wants for the sake of the family. Still, Bhola bought them new flannel shirts, watches and shoes.

Three months later the matriculation results came out: both Ratan and Lal passed in first division. Even so, neither felt drawn to further study. They began thinking about earning. They started seeking work, trying for whatever jobs they could find. Jobs were scarce and unreliable; villages everywhere were full of young people, educated and uneducated alike, ready and waiting for any piece of work. In this way the society's true capital, its human potential and dignity, was being consumed like fuel thrown into a blaze.

Time began to turn. For educated young men, new doors to employment opened, even if only slightly. The village school started recruiting Shiksha Mitras, temporary teaching assistants, which brought a flicker of hope among the educated youth. Though the honorarium was barely enough to live on, in an age of unemployment it was still a blessing.

Ratan and Lal both received appointments in the neighbouring village school. On the fifth, they were to join. The regret of not studying further was quickly replaced by the joy of finding work. Their minds were still pure, untouched by greed, yet the brothers sat together to think about their family's future.

Ratan said to Lal, "Brother, you've seen how our father worked to educate us both. We've come this far because of him. Now it's our turn to think what our duty toward him should be."

Lal replied, "Brother, we are sons of the same soil where a son like Shravan Kumar once lived. Before the fifth, we must call Father back from Calcutta. We are cart-puller's sons, and there's no shame in that. The real shame would be if he keeps pulling the cart while we sit

in chairs giving lectures to others.”

Ratan nodded in agreement. “I’ll write to Father today,” he said. “The letter will reach him in time. We’ll ask him to take the train home. On the fifth, before we go to join, we want to touch his feet and take his blessing.”

Hearing her sons’ plan, their mother’s heart trembled at the edge of joy and sorrow. In her mind, she saw the image of a ruined hut turning into a bright, shining house. Tears filled her eyes, not of grief, but of deep, grateful happiness. ❑

Livelihood

☰

It was the night of Shivaratri and the mid of the month. For a month and a half, the cold wave had been so severe that the sun itself seemed on the verge of death, yet now a new pulse of life had returned to it. Gradually, warmth began to flow again into the sunlight.

At four in the morning, Umakant woke up. His eyes went straight to the wall clock; it was exactly four. Lying still on the cot, he began to gaze inwardly at the path of his coming life. Only yesterday, he and his friend had decided that they would buy a tempo and for this leave early by the morning train to Darbhanga. A new resolve for a changing life had taken root in his mind, because life rewards only those who dare to act.

He thought, "The train leaves at five fifty-five, so I'll step out by five. It takes hardly half an hour to reach the station, but it's better to arrive early. Trains are seldom on time, often an hour or so late, but what of that? I'll be punctual. A good beginning should always precede its time."

With that thought, Umakant rose from his bed. Another thought followed; his own sleep had broken, but what if his friend was still asleep? That would cause delay. Best to wake him up before going to the latrine. Then he smiled to himself, "I can take the brush-stick along; I'll finish one errand while on the way."

As he picked up the toothbrush twig, yet another thought crossed his mind: "I must eat something before I leave. Who knows what lies on the road ahead? The journey is uncertain, and who can trust these iron-bodied vehicles? When they run, they run; when they stop, they stop dead."

He remembered an earlier mishap. Once, on his way to Darbhanga, the train's engine broke down between Manigachhi and Lohana. It had been an early morning train, and he had thought, "I'll have breakfast once I reach." But fate had other plans. The train stood stranded there till two in the afternoon. Sometimes he sat in the coach, sometimes he walked to the engine to ask the driver what was wrong. The poor man himself looked bewildered. "I kept waiting in vain," he thought. "Had I known, I would have left the train, gone to Bidesar Chowk, taken a bus, and by dawn I would have been in Darbhanga." But he hadn't. The result was a long day of hunger and thirst.

That day had taught him one thing well: never again to leave home on an empty stomach.

As the thought crossed his mind, Umakant woke his wife and said, "By the time I return from my friend's house, you prepare four rotis and some fried potatoes."

Saying this, he went to Shobhakant's house, brushing his teeth as he walked. Even while cleaning his teeth, his mind kept turning over the thought that work is what makes a person truly human, or a beast. Everyone in this world does something or the other, but some become divine while others turn into demons. The real thing is how one measures one's work; that alone defines a person.

Reaching Shobhakant's house, Umakant called out from the lane, "Friend! Are you awake, my friend?"

From inside, Shobhakant rose from his bed and replied, "Yes, friend, I am. I woke up too. It's still dark though."

Umakant said, "It's already past four. By the time we're ready, it'll be five. Let's go a little early to the station."

Umakant and Shobhakant were of the same temper. No one in the village could tell who among them was older or younger, and neither cared to know. Since childhood, they had lived side by side so long that even the villagers had forgotten the difference. Both had lost their parents early, and who remembers the orphaned for long? Yet they both found advantage in each other's company, the advantage of ease and familiarity. They would joke and laugh freely, even with each other's wives. So neither took offense.

The old men and women of the village, and even the young daughters-in-law, called both women shameless. But neither of the friends nor their wives cared. For the women, there was a certain pride in being able to talk, laugh, and share a moment with more than one man, it gave them a sense of being seen, alive, part of the world.

Since childhood, Umakant and Shobhakant had played marbles and stick games together, and studied together in the village school. As boys, they would call each other's names so often that one seemed incomplete without the other. But as they grew older, life began to part them. When it was time for high school, Umakant got admitted, but Shobhakant, being poor, had to leave his studies.

Umakant's family owned two or three bighas of land, and his father worked as a teacher in the village school. Yet, even then, Shobhakant had always been the sharper and more capable of the two, cleverer in mind and stronger in memory. In class, he often topped the exams and earned the teachers' respect. Among the boys too, he carried a quiet authority.

After leaving his studies, Shobhakant went to Patna in search of work. When he left the village, he had thought, "Whatever job I find, I'll do it." But on the way, his mind changed. He decided he would not work in a tea stall, nor in a hotel, nor in anyone's house, nor at a liquor shop. "If I don't get a job, I'll pull a rickshaw or work as a porter. Government service is out of the question; I'm not old enough yet," he thought.

It was the first time Shobhakant had ever stepped into a city. Yet the glitter and bustle that usually fascinates people left him untouched. Just as a poor man's eyes never lift toward a jewelry shop, his gaze too turned away from such temptations.

After getting off the train, he took the northern road from the station. He did not even glance at the large buildings that lined the way. A little ahead, he noticed a bicycle repair shop. He stopped there on the roadside, quietly observing. The shopkeeper's eyes soon caught him.

Looking at the boy, the mechanic thought, "I waste time running about doing odd chores myself, and the bigger work suffers. Maybe I should ask this boy if he needs work. If he does, I'll keep

him."

He signalled with his hand and called out, "Boy, what's your name?"

"Shobhakant," the boy replied.

"Where's your home?"

"In Madhubani district."

"Where are you headed?"

"I've come looking for work."

"Will you stay here?"

"Yes, I will stay."

Just as a housewife welcomes a guest at the door with a lota of water, offers him a seat, and urges him to eat something, the mechanic received Shobhakant in the same manner. He handed him eight annas and, pointing with his finger toward a shop selling muri and kachari, said, "Go there and have some food."

Keeping his small bundle aside, Shobhakant left. His body and arms still ached from the long, cramped train ride, and hunger too had started gnawing at him. Yet, after getting a job, both his fatigue and hunger seemed to fade away.

Sitting at the roadside shop, he ordered muri and kachari. The shopkeeper, noticing his simple face and shy tone, asked, "Son, where's your home?"

"In Madhubani district," he replied.

"Tell me the name of your village."

"Lalganj."

The shopkeeper's eyes lit up, "Well, my village is right next to yours, Rupauli! I've been living here for twenty-five years."

Without taking a single coin, the shopkeeper fed him to his fill. After eating, Shobhakant returned to the cycle repair shop and handed the money back to the mechanic. "The shopkeeper didn't take it," he said quietly.

The mechanic was busy among a crowd of customers, so he said nothing more.

That's how Shobhakant's life began, by fixing punctures and doing small repair jobs. As he kept at it, the mechanic too got the chance to expand his work. Soon he began repairing not just cycles and rickshaws but also motorcycles and tempos.

Shobhakant too got his opportunity. He started learning the craft of earning. Forgetting the world, he immersed himself in the rhythm of wrench and hammer.

Within six months, Shobhakant had become a skilled mechanic for cycles and rickshaws, and had even learned to repair motorcycles and drive tempos. Hard work transformed not only his fortune but his body too; within a year, he had grown into a strong young man.

He obtained a driver's license. Yet even then, a dilemma stirred within him, should he continue as a driver or open his own repair shop? But opening a shop would require renting a place and buying tools, both costly affairs. He thought, "Getting a house on the main road won't be easy, and I don't have enough money to buy all the equipment. Better to drive."

So he chose driving. The pay was decent, and there were extra earnings from side trips. The first month was a little unsettled, but by the second month, things began to fall into place. He started saving his wages and sending the extra income home.

With a year's savings from his wages, Shobhakant bought a tempo. Loading all his belongings onto it, he returned straight to his village.

Meanwhile, Umakant had completed his B.A. in second division. Though education was spreading, jobs were few. No one among the educated wished to till the soil or work in trade. Because of this, the condition of the villages kept declining day by day. The villagers, too, were of the kind who would laugh openly whenever they saw an educated man working in the fields, taunting him in countless ways. This made employment a necessity for every educated youth, not a choice.

In search of a job, Umakant began running from pillar to post. Yet he had taken a firm vow: he would never buy a job with bribes. Whether he got one or not, he would not bow to corruption. But the

longer the search went on, the more his resolve began to waver. His mind became restless, and many questions started haunting him. At times, he thought of selling five katthas of land to secure a position through money. Then again, he told himself, “If I get a job by bribery, won’t I also accept bribes when my turn comes? What kind of life would that be? I would be dead even while living.”

He felt as if those who took such a path died spiritually long before their bodies did. Yet he could not quiet his heart. Finally, he thought of consulting his wife, his lifelong companion. Perhaps she would have some light to offer.

Calmer now, he approached her and asked gently, “It’s hard to get a job these days without paying a bribe. What do you think?”

Smiling softly, his wife replied, “In this age, finding a job is like finding life itself. I have some jewelry, if that isn’t enough, sell a little land and get the job. Just look around; in one year people turn their lives completely around.”

Umakant’s mind was already in turmoil, and his wife’s words only deepened the darkness. Hope began to fade; his eyes lost their brightness, and life itself seemed to withdraw its light. He could no longer see a single spark of promise ahead. In that state, every shadow took a fearful shape, ghosts, thieves, snakes, and spirits seemed to surround him in the night of despair.

Yet, in that sinking life, a faint flicker appeared, like a tiny flame trembling against the wind. And with that flicker came the stir of strength. A new resolve began to sprout within him, and from that sprouting, courage was born. He thought to himself, “Life must have a purpose. Man is not a fragile insect that dies at the mere touch of another’s foot. Man is a part of the Divine, carrying within him immense power. So what if storms come and winds howl, should a man then abandon his humanity? Humanity itself is a man’s true wealth, the treasure of his being. Can one ever throw that away? Never.”

With that rising thought, his spirit regained light. He reasoned inwardly, “If I do not get a government job, does that mean I’ll sit idle with my hands folded? Am I so weak? Has every spark of manhood died within me? Surely not. I can still do something.”

Then and there, he turned his gaze away from government service and decided to start a ration shop. The thought came from a deep realization that to live, one must earn, and most of life's works run on the strength of money. Without means, life loses its meaning.

He knew that earning money was not wrong; what mattered was how one earned it, and how one used it. A ration shop, he thought, was a genuine need of every village, a bridge between the people and the government. Though getting a dealer's license involved its own tricks and payments, Umakant resolved to try with all his heart.

After finally obtaining the license, he went to meet Mishrilal before beginning the business to learn the trade, its rules, and its ways.

Mishrilal was an old and respected dealer. He had earned honour not only in the village but also in the government offices. His way of maintaining respect was his own, calm, steady, and shrewd. Among the forty-five dealers in the block, all had chosen him as their union secretary. Just as every dealer trusted Mishrilal, so did Mishrilal respect them all.

Understanding the need for guidance, Umakant decided to meet Mishrilal in person. When he reached Mishrilal's house, he saw four or five men sitting with registers, signing and marking pages. The distribution of goods for the previous month had already taken place, and without the records being updated, the next consignment could not be lifted. Realizing the importance of this work, Mishrilal was deeply absorbed in it.

As soon as he noticed Umakant, Mishrilal paused in the middle of the register, placed his pen and carbon paper neatly on the page, folded it, and said to his son, "Go, make some tea." Then turning toward Umakant, he asked, "So, what brings you here, Boy?"

Without hesitation, Umakant replied, "Brother, you're an experienced dealer and know every detail of this trade. After completing my B.A., I spent two years chasing government jobs, but nowhere did I get a foothold. Now even the age limit has almost passed, so I gave up that hope and applied for a ration dealership instead."

Hearing that Umakant had failed to get a job, Mishrilal smiled faintly and said, "Boy, this world works like a big joint family where four or five brothers live together. Everything belongs to everyone, yet each brother's wife keeps her own secrets and possessions. The brothers, too, hide things from one another. And what happens? Fire breaks out in the household. The same has happened in government jobs.

Those who sit on the chairs are busy arranging positions for their sons-in-law and relatives. Everywhere there is buying and selling. The result is that jobs have become hereditary. You are educated; you can see for yourself what kind of development the country is making. If there is progress in one corner, ten new 'job-born lineages' spring up from it. The son of a doctor becomes a doctor. The son of an engineer becomes an engineer. Everyone clings to what they have as if it were ancestral property.

And look at your fate, you have met the same end as the third brother in such a family, left out despite your effort. Worse still are those clever ones who not only hold government jobs but have grabbed land as well, and whenever a new scheme is announced, they swallow that too. That's why you'll see some people losing everything while others keep piling up wealth."

Umakant listened patiently and said, "Brother, let's leave aside the talk of the world. Tell me instead about our work, how to begin and what to learn."

Mishrilal said, "Boy, you are still young and full of energy, but the path you've chosen to make your living is not the right one for you. A man like you shouldn't take up dealership work. I have drunk from every well, learned the taste of every water. I know what is good and what is rotten. I've bent and swayed with the winds of this trade, and that's why my business runs smoothly. But you, this work won't suit you."

Umakant asked quietly, "Why not?"

Just then, the tea arrived. Both took a glass in hand. After taking a sip, Mishrilal continued, "You see, dealership is a trade that stands at the border of two worlds. On one side lies the world of power; on the other, the world of ordinary people. And both worlds

are crooked."

Umakant leaned forward, puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

Explaining patiently, Mishrilal began, "Let me first tell you about the public. Ration goods like sugar and kerosene are supplied according to quota. That's the rule. If people could buy as much as they pleased, there would be no need for a controlled market, but that's not how it works. In every village, you'll find a few quarrelsome types, fellows who, if you refuse to give them what they demand, will spend the whole day picking fights, with you and with everyone else. There's no limit to their quarrels. And if things go too far one day, you'll end up facing sticks and clubs.

Now, tell me, will you be able to run your business or spend your time in court cases? You know how the courts work, they thrive on other people's money. Those troublemakers, they don't work themselves, only interfere in others' work. From stirring up village disputes to acting as middlemen for the police and the courts, that's their daily occupation. You tell me, can a decent man survive among them? In this world, there's no place left for honest people. These rascals drink liquor all day, staggering about without shame or sense. They don't care for the young or the old, nor do they fear words or blows.

And on top of that, the village headmen and ward members all expect their share of commission. The public is no better. You'll see families who have no real need for ration goods like sugar, yet they draw their quota and resell it to make a little profit. And then there are families so poor that even their full quota doesn't meet their needs. You'll see it with your own eyes, some of them drink twenty cups of tea a day. Won't such people need extra sugar? But the moment you give one man a little extra, you'll have to cut another man's share. What can the dealer do in such a situation? After all, he too is a part of that same society."

Umakant said thoughtfully, "But everyone must not take their quota every time, right?"

"Yes," Mishrilal nodded, "that happens too, but only when the price difference between ration goods and open-market goods

disappears. When the prices differ, anyone with a little cash buys from the ration dealer at half profit and resells it. Not only that, they expect the dealer to give them something extra."

Umakant pursed his lips and said quietly, "Then it's a tangled world indeed."

Seeing the depth of thought on Umakant's face, Mishrilal smiled and said, "Boy, you are only beginning to sense how tangled it all is. And I have only told you one side of the story. Even in that, you have missed plenty of knots. If I were to tell you everything in detail, there would be hundreds more twists to unravel. Now listen to how things work with the office, the bank, and the FCI warehouse. I will skip the running around part, because that alone can drain you. Just know this much: what looks like a day's work often takes fifteen. And along with time, you will spend at least twenty-five to fifty rupees on small favours."

Umakant frowned, "Then it is a real mess, isn't it?"

Mishrilal chuckled, "Mess, it is mess upon mess. The moment you step into the block office, they will swoop down on you like vultures- officers, clerks, peons, all alike. One will ask for tea, another for betel, another for cigarettes, and another for sweets. You will hear so many demands your head will spin. But what can you do? Look at them, they act poorer than beggars, as if their salaries never come. Yet the dealer must keep them happy, or the work simply stops. This is not the kind of work that finishes at one table. Every desk you pass means another payment. I have been through it all myself, so I can no longer say whether it is right or wrong. You see me preparing the register now; next, I will have to go to the block office. Still, let me tell you a few things that come to mind. I have seen every trick in the trade."

Umakant said earnestly, "Then please, tell me a little about each."

Mishrilal nodded, "I cannot recall every detail just now, but what I remember, I will tell you. Let us start with the bank. In Koreyapatty there is a dealer named Dunyalaal, a simple and honest man. He used to keep the money as the goods sold, little by little. When the time came to deposit the next quota's amount, he went to

the bank with all that small change. The banker refused to take it, saying, ‘Do you think I have nothing else to do all day but count your coins?’ The poor man stood there helpless. He did not even dare step outside, fearing a pickpocket might snatch the money. The next day, he came to me in frustration. I was furious too. Why should the bank reject government money just because it is in small notes? If banks handle cash, they should keep staff to count it. But what could I do? I went there the next day myself, spoke to the manager. Finally, he agreed, but only after deducting two percent as commission. Now tell me, where does that two percent go in the government books? And that is not all. Take the case of the Supply Inspector. When a new inspector was appointed, fifteen or twenty dealers did not pay him his expected fee.”

“Normally,” Mishrilal continued, “every dealer pays the Supply Inspector fifty rupees a month. When the new officer joined, everyone thought, ‘He’s fresh and honest, he’ll behave properly for at least six months.’ But the very next evening, once the dealers had lifted their new stock, the inspector showed his true colours. He went straight to Biswanath’s house.

Biswanath had no fear in his heart, because he knew his goods were in order. As soon as the inspector arrived, he asked Biswanath to weigh the sugar. Biswanath agreed and began the weighing. Out of five bags, a total of fourteen kilos was missing.”

Umakant interrupted, startled, “Why, didn’t he weigh it when he took it from the warehouse?”

Mishrilal sighed, “That’s the game of the FCI godown. The warehouse serves several blocks, and every dealer has his own number. You’ll see all of them standing in line, waiting for their turn. Not everyone owns a truck. Most of them hire vehicles to carry their goods. They always think, ‘The faster we load, the less rent we pay.’ So no one bothers to weigh the stock properly. Now, if a dealer slips twenty-five rupees per bag to the godown manager, he gets full, well-packed bags. But if he doesn’t pay, he gets half-filled, leaky ones. It’s thieves stealing from thieves.”

Umakant, agitated, said, “This is beyond belief.”

Mishrilal smiled grimly, “Now, listen about the marketing

Officer, the M.O. The one we have now drinks, though he's sharp in his work. He rides his motorcycle from place to place, signs the files right on the road, but never for free. First you must offer him a bottle of liquor, only then will he move his pen."

Umakant frowned, "An officer drinks on the roadside while doing his duty?"

Mishrilal burst out laughing. "Son, you still think like a village man. In the villages, people worry about shame and reputation, but where will you find that among these officials? Still, to be fair, the man has two virtues. First, he never looks at another man's wife. Second, he never takes money from anyone directly. The officer before him, though, was a real money-eater. He had a fixed rate for every job. Everyone knew his terms. So whoever needed any work done paid the required amount and got it done immediately."

Smiling faintly, Umakant said, "Then they must be real actors."

Mishrilal replied, "Actors? They are worse than actors. The world is full of thieves of every colour. Some steal money, some steal faith. Some steal intelligence, others steal conscience. What can I say? Now listen about the third one. He must have been fifty-five or fifty-six years old, but he dressed and behaved like a young man. His clothes were tailored sharp as diamonds, his hair trimmed like a hippie's. He always smelled of perfume and oil, of many colours and brands. He could be seen constantly checking the upper pocket of his shirt, as if guarding something precious. At night he would comb his hair several times, and shaved twice a day.

That M.O. was a true dandy, and his wife was just like him. Between them, there was a strange harmony of vanity. She would change her clothes twenty-five times a day-sari, blouse, shoes, everything. Her hair glittered with colourful clips, so many that one lost count. The whole day they would ride on rickshaws, going from one lodge to another, one bazaar to the next. By chance, fortune favoured him. In one stroke, both the B.D.O. and the C.O. were transferred, and he was given charge of both offices. Around the same time, the recruitment for 'Shiksha Mitra' was announced. Girls received reservation benefits, which meant caste certificates were required."

Mishrilal sighed deeply and went on, “Boy, what can I tell you? His quarters turned into a brothel. He rarely sat in the block office. When he did, he looked through other papers, but never signed a single caste certificate.”

Umakant interrupted, “Didn’t anyone from his family object?”

“I already told you about his wife,” Mishrilal replied. “As for his elder daughter, she was studying for her B.A. She too had picked up her parents’ ways. She ran away with a college boy, a tribal Christian.”

Umakant asked, “Weren’t the parents ashamed?”

“They were so ashamed that they fled overnight,” Mishrilal said with a heavy tone.

Umakant rose to leave, “You have plenty of work, and I too have heard enough. But before I go, tell me one last thing.”

Mishrilal looked up, “What is it?”

Umakant asked, “How have you managed to keep your reputation intact, in both society and the office?”

Mishrilal smiled and said, “In the village, whenever someone has a ceremony such as a funeral feast, wedding, initiation, head-shaving, or any other social function, I make sure to help with sugar and kerosene. Even if I do not have enough in stock, I manage somehow and supply it. That way, people stay happy and the village remains at peace. As for the office, I have already told you how I handle that.”

Umakant asked quietly, “Then what should I do? To be honest, after hearing all this, my mind feels restless and uncertain.”

Mishrilal replied kindly, “Boy, since you have got your license now, start by lifting one round of stock and distributing it yourself. That way you will understand both sides, how the people behave and how the office works. Experience is the real knowledge, and only practice teaches it. I will help you this first time, make sure you face no obstacles. But do not expect me to do it again. You know the saying, if a cat befriends a mouse, what will it eat? You must learn your trade on your own.”

Umakant nodded, “All right. I will do exactly as you say.”

Mishrilal smiled again, “I am an old man now. I started this work when I was sixteen. There is a world of difference between those days and today. The more money and education have spread, the more corrupt people have become. Once, honest men were many, now you can count them on your fingers. I have grown used to this trade. I have tasted every water, learned every trick, and so far, I have survived.”

Umakant said as he rose, “And before I go, any last piece of advice?”

Mishrilal thought for a moment, then said, "Man is like the mango tree. The sapling that grows from a mango seed will one day bear mangoes. So it is with man. Every person is born simple and ignorant, but what he becomes depends on the soil, the family, the society, and the air he breathes. If a small wild sapling is grafted with a good branch, it bears fine fruit. The same goes for people. But tell me, how many good families and good societies do we have today? Most are broken, poor, and hungry. People do not get enough to eat, nor do they hear enough good thoughts. How then will good men be born? And until good men are born, how will a good society come into being?

So the best you can do is this: within the world as it is, keep yourself as good as you can. That alone brings peace. You are still like a clean white page, I only wish you remain unstained. As are your thoughts and your hands, so will be your deeds, and such will be your life. Some believe death ends the body, others believe it kills the soul. But remember, man holds within him an infinite power. He must awaken it. Even I have not fully understood how.”

The words struck Umakant like a sharp tool placed in steady hands. He felt a surge of strength. He thought, “The age of bullock carts is gone. The age of machines has arrived. I too shall drive with my own hands.” ❑

The Rickshaw Puller

☰

O rickshaw! O rickshaw!

Jibach called out loudly from a distance.

In his hand swung a Bombay-style bag. He wore jeans and a crisp shirt, a broad watch on his right wrist, shining shoes with socks. His hair was cut in a Bombay hippie style, a faint moustache, sunglasses on his eyes.

Bachanu, the rickshaw puller was playing cards with his friends. Their rule was simple: whoever lost had to pay for tea and snacks for all the four. Only one more red call and Bachanu's pair would win. That last red would settle the treat. So his mind was fixed on the cards when Jibach arrived, sweating from the heat.

Jibach put his bag down near the group, wiped his face with a handkerchief, and said, "Brother, I have to go far, can you take me right away?"

Bachanu looked up from the cards and said, "Brother, what lovely cool weather this is, sit a bit, rest. You're drenched in sweat. I've just one red left. Two or three rounds more and it'll be done. Even if my red doesn't come, the opponent's two blacks will seal my win."

Jibach smiled faintly and took off his shirt and undershirt, spreading them out in the blazing sun. It was the month of Asin. The heat was sharp, the air still. He had walked from the railway station because near it a huge flood had cut off the road for rickshaws and carts. People were wading through water, somehow keeping their balance. The flood was such that if the station hadn't stood on high ground, it too would have been washed away.

Still, the eastern crossing, the bridge, and half a kilometer of

track had been submerged. On the southern side, the flood had dug deep pits, blocking traffic for weeks. Only after a month and a half was the bridge rebuilt and vehicles began to move again.

In the whole village, only Bachanu had a rickshaw, no competition at all. Competition belongs to the towns and markets, where hundreds of rickshaws roam, each calling out, "Court, office, bank, post office, college, school, station, bus stand, hospital, main market, cinema square, Dak Bungalow, Bhagat Singh Square, Azad Square."

It is not so in the village. And do rickshaw pullers in villages not earn? They surely do. The roads are rough and broken, filled with pits and paddy straw after harvest. No motor vehicle can pass through them, so people depend on rickshaws. Through these rides, daughters and daughters-in-law travel for family visits and ceremonies. Gratitude belongs to the rickshaw puller who lifts the weight upon his chest, pushes and drags, climbing and descending, earning through sweat and hardship.

The card game was still not going well, sometimes short of reds, sometimes of blacks.

Growing restless, Jibach said again, "Brother, these cards won't favour you today. I have to go far, please come soon. If darkness falls, it'll trouble you too, and I'll be late. From here to Suggapatty must be five kos (miles) at least."

Bachanu replied, "Yes, it is not less than five kos (kilometers).But so what? This isn't a city or a market where even in daylight one fears pickpockets, robbers, or kidnappers. There's no crowd on the road, nothing to fear. We'll go by the lower path."

In the heart of the village stood the choubatti, the four-way crossing, with six or seven small shops. People from this and nearby villages called it the chowk. Behind it, in the western corner, stood a wide banyan-like tree covered in dense leaves where thousands of birds had their nests. All day they flew off to forage and, as evening fell, returned chattering and fluttering onto the branches.

There were birds of many kinds and colours, each building its own nest. The branches were divided among them. One kind took one

branch, another kind took the next. There was no quarrel or conflict between different kinds of birds. Among their own, though, they chattered endlessly, sometimes kindly, sometimes harshly, about kin and family, about stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, about village gossip, even scolding or fining those who failed in duty.

Under that same tree, travellers rested from the sun or took shelter from the rain, and beneath it the card players spread their mat and gathered for the game.

Hearing Bachanu's words, Jibach took out a cigarette packet and a matchbox from the back pocket of his jeans. He lit one for himself and offered one to Bachanu. Both of them puffed slowly, mounted the rickshaw, and started on their way.

After they had gone a short distance, Bachanu turned and asked, "Brother, do you live in Bombay?"

"Yes," said Jibach.

"I've wanted to go there for years," said Bachanu, "but somehow the chance never comes."

"You must like it there?"

"What to say, brother! The moment you step out of your room, you see so many colourful young women. Even the older ones wear such fine clothes that you'd think they were girls. And the men, they're no less. The girls wear costly dresses, their whole bodies gleaming, and the men wear dark glasses and keep staring at them. Those glasses, they're no ordinary ones. The moment you put them on, you can't even tell if someone's wearing clothes or not."

Jibach laughed and said, "We don't have such glasses in our parts."

Bachanu smiled, "Of course not. Those foreign glasses are sold there, not here. Who in the village would buy such things?"

A little north of the square stood a toddy shop surrounded by a small grove of date palms, four or five plots of them, with tall trees scattered here and there. The road ran east to west, and on the western side stood the shop.

Seeing it, Jibach tapped Bachanu on the back and gestured for him to stop. Bachanu thought he probably wanted to relieve himself,

so he stopped the rickshaw and got down. But Jibach said, “Brother, there’s a toddy shop ahead. Let’s have a couple of sips before we go. I’ll pay.”

At the word 'toddy,'Bachanu shook his head. “I do drink toddy,” he said, “but I never drive the rickshaw after drinking, and I don’t carry drunk passengers either. So for now, let’s forget about toddy or liquor. When we reach home, you can drink as much as you wish.”

“But who knows if we’ll get any there,” Jibach said. “We have it right here, in front of us.”

“Then buy it and carry it along,” said Bachanu. “We’ll both drink at the village tonight. You can stay there for the night.”

“Where will I stay?” asked Jibach.

“Why not at my home?” Bachanu replied. “Stay there, rest in the night. I’ll drop you where you wish in the morning.”

“Alright then, let’s go,” said Jibach.

Both of them walked toward the toddy shop. As they reached, Jibach saw large earthen jars brimming with frothy toddy. Watching the jars bubbling, he thought to himself: So it’s not just the city people who drink toddy, village folks enjoy it just as much.

About twenty-five or thirty men were sitting inside and outside the shop on mats woven from palm leaves, drinking toddy and eating snacks. Some sat alone, others in small groups of two, three, or four. Some told stories, some sang songs, and a few were reciting loud rustic verses full of humour and mockery. Everyone seemed in high spirits. As the froth of the toddy rose, so did their excitement. The sharp, sour fragrance of the drink made Jibach restless, he felt eager to gulp down a couple of glasses right away.

A little away from the toddy shop, two old women had set up food stalls. One sold murhi (puffed rice), ghughni (spiced chickpeas), and kachari (fried cakes). The other offered fried fish of several kinds, glistening in red oil. Pointing with his finger toward a medium-sized jar, Jibach said to Bachanu, “Brother, there are just two of us drinking, so this one should be enough.”

“Better ask the price first,” said Bachanu.

Jibach held the neck of the jar and asked the pasi (toddy seller) the cost. After a bit of haggling, they settled on thirty-five rupees. Jibach took a note from his pocket and handed it over. The seller said, "The price includes the toddy itself, take the jar away."

"Good," replied Bachanu, lifting the jar.

He placed it near the snack stall and sat thinking, Today's earnings are almost gone. What will my children eat now? Yet he comforted himself that at least they could eat murhi and kachari, simple food that fills the stomach.

The fried cakes were crisp and golden, and the fish fritters were bright red, rich with spices. Seeing them, Jibach's mouth began to water. He turned to Bachanu and asked, "Brother, how much should we buy for snacks?"

Bachanu started calculating silently. Two pieces of kachari and two fish fritters for the children, four of each for us, since it's hot and spicy, too much will do us no good. Then he said aloud, "Brother, take one kilo of murhi, one kilo of ghughni, sixteen kacharis, and sixteen fish fritters."

He did exactly that. Picking up the jar of toddy, Jibach followed. When they reached the rickshaw, Bachanu handed him the bundle of snacks as well.

Leaving the main road from the square, Bachanu turned onto the path leading to his home. His house was close by, just two houses away. He parked the rickshaw in the small open yard, one part of the house was used for cooking and storing firewood, and the other for sleeping and keeping things. There was no front door, only an open space before the house, about ten dhur of fallow land, on which the government had built a cemented platform.

As soon as he reached home, Bachanu set the rickshaw aside and went into the courtyard to bring a broom. Seeing him, his wife said, "So, you haven't earned a single fare today? What will we eat tonight? You and I can go hungry, but what about the children?"

Without replying, Bachanu took the broom and came out again. He swept the platform clean. The cemented slab shone bright under the evening light. Seeing it, Jibach said, "Brother, what a strong and

beautiful platform this is! It shines like marble."

Hearing that, Bachanu remembered the day he had fought with the contractor. Smiling faintly, he said, "Yes, it came out well in the end. But the contractor who had taken the job was a cheat. He was using third-grade bricks and sand from the Kosi river. I was away from the village then. When I returned and saw it, my blood boiled. The next day the contractor and his men came to work again. I was still furious. I snatched the spade from one of the workers, shouted at the contractor, and said, 'If you touch this again before fixing it properly, I'll cut you with this spade.' The people around grabbed me, but the contractor trembled like a beaten snake. After that, he brought proper materials–good bricks, cement, and sand–and rebuilt it right."

"Splendid!" said Jibach.

Bachanu pointed toward the platform, "Come up and see what else I've made. Here, people play cards, twenty-five points, using cowries instead of coins. But this game has its season. It's played only during Asin. On the night of Kojagra, people play here till dawn."

Pointing to another house, Bachanu said, "This one belongs to Mughal Pathan. People in our village call it Mughal-Pathan's house, but folks from other villages call it Kaua-Thutthi, the crow's beak. The game played here is Goti, like marbles."

Showing the third house, he added, "And that one belongs to the children. It's called the Chairkhi-Chairkhi house. They play make-believe games there."

Jibach laughed, "Brother, you seem to be quite the player yourself."

Bachanu replied, "What else is there in life? Eat, drink, laugh, and pass the days. Every day we work, every day we eat. There's no need for constant toil and worry. I've even started a small school for my children. I know every kind of work, farming, pulling rickshaws, making bricks. My children will learn by watching me."

While Jibach listened, his mind kept drifting toward the sour aroma of the toddy. He kept thinking about when he might get to drink two glasses, or at least dip his fingers and rub a few drops between his nostrils.

Just then, Bachanu said, “Brother, while you set up everything, I’ll go put the rickshaw away in the shed. We’ll go down once the chores are done.”

Jibach began arranging the food and drink. Bachanu folded and stored the rickshaw in the small shed, then went into the courtyard and said to his wife and children, “Bring two bowls and two leaf plates.”

He moved ahead, and his wife’s heart was filled with joy. The two children brought the bowls forward, while she stood by the lamp with a piece of cloth covering her face, peeking shyly at them.

Bachanu placed four fried fish fritters and four kacharis on a plate, mixed half a kilo of murhi and ghughni with them, and gave each child one kachari, one piece of fish, and two handfuls of the mixture. The children’s eyes widened with delight. They lifted their bowls in their left hands and began eating eagerly with their right.

When they reached their mother, they showed her their bowls. Seeing the red, spicy ghughni and chilies, she said gently, “My dear ones, pick out the chilies first, or they’ll burn your tongue.”

Meanwhile, Bachanu took one end of his towel, mixed together a portion of murhi and ghughni, placed four kacharis and four fried fish fritters on it, wrapped them up, and set the bundle aside for the two of them. From the platform, he called out to his wife, “Take these.”

His wife, her head half-covered with her sari, came up to the platform. She placed two leaf plates before him. Bachanu divided the food, one plate with murhi and kachari, the other with ghughni and fish, and handed them to her. Seeing the bright red fried fish, her face lit up with a quiet smile. In her mind she thought, this will last us till tomorrow’s meal. She balanced the two plate’s one atop the other, held them carefully with both hands, and went back toward the courtyard.

Meanwhile, Bachanu and Jibach sat together. Between them, on the platform, they placed the jar of toddy, two glasses, and the food. Jibach poured toddy into both glasses, set them before them, closed his eyes, and moved his lips as if reciting a silent prayer. After

a moment, he opened his eyes, dipped his fingers in the toddy three times, flicked the drops toward the ground, and said, "Alright, brother, now we can begin."

They were already flushed with excitement. As soon as they began, each drank three glasses in quick succession. A calm warmth spread through them. Relaxed, Jibach took out a cigarette, lit one for himself, and offered one to Bachanu. Both smoked slowly, lost in the mellow air.

Soon the toddy began to take hold. Conversation came easily. Taking a handful of murhi and a piece of fish, Jibach asked, "Brother, does rickshaw pulling earn you enough to run the household?"

Breaking a kachari into his mouth, Bachanu replied, "Why not? I'm not building any mansion that the income won't suffice. Besides, I don't pull the rickshaw all year round, only during the rainy season. When the rains stop, I work at Mahakant Bhai's brick kiln."

"So you have a job too?" asked Jibach.

"That kind of job is a blessing," said Bachanu. "Mahakant Bhai is a good man, simple-hearted. He has the capital, but the real running of the business is done by the two of us, Sarup Munshi and me. Sarup handles accounts, purchases, and coal orders. My duty is to oversee the kiln, managing the fire, pouring water when needed, fetching supplies from the market, and carrying things between the chimney site and the house."

Jibach nodded and smiled, "Then you must be earning quite well."

"If I really wanted to earn more, I could," said Bachanu, "but I don't. I make about a hundred rupees a day. I give that to my wife. The rest I spend on food and drink. If I brought home money earned in the wrong way, it wouldn't bring peace to the house anyway."

Both of them refilled their glasses and drank another round of toddy, finishing the snacks beside them. The drink had made their bodies light and their minds heavy. Soon both felt an urgent need to relieve themselves but were too drowsy to move. The pressure grew until they could no longer bear it, and they stumbled off to the side to urinate. By the time they squatted down, they almost lost control,

barely managing to keep their clothes dry. After a long while, the stream stopped, and they both sighed in relief.

They returned to the platform and sat down again. Jibach said, “Brother, I feel like dancing.”

At this, Bachanu folded his legs, sat cross-legged, and began to beat his knees with both hands. The sound came not from the slaps but from his mouth, humming a rough rhythm. As he sang, he kept tapping faster and louder. Soon the two children came running to the platform and began clapping along. From the doorway of the courtyard, his wife sat watching, her face half covered with her sari, eyes glimmering in the lamplight.

Jibach stood up and began to dance, swaying and stomping to the rhythm. After a while, Bachanu’s mouth began to ache, but Jibach kept dancing, the children clapping in time. The woman’s heart drifted like a bit of grass on floodwater, half fearful, half lost in the scene before her.

Then Bachanu went into the yard, fetched an empty water pot, poured out the little water left, turned it upside down, and began drumming on its bottom with his fingers. A ring on one finger gave the sound a metallic chime, it became a perfect drum.

They danced and drummed until exhaustion overtook them. At last, they lay down where they were and fell asleep.

At dawn, both woke, washed their faces and hands, and, still a little unsteady, took up the rickshaw and set off down the road.

This time the month of Āsin took a different turn. Usually, the Hathiya constellation appears midway through Āsin, but not this year, it came first. Two days after Hathiya had passed, Āsin began. The elders often say that Hathiya always falls during Durga Puja, yet this year it didn’t.

By the bright fortnight of Āsin, the Durga Puja generally begins, with Hathiya overhead. But this time, the constellation had already set by the new moon. The rains too were unusual. On the very day Āsin began, heavy showers burst forth, and after that not a drop fell. The clouds cleared away completely. The water left by Hathiya dried the firewood and the earthen hearths in every house, and the

ponds and streams grew still. Yet the farmers were not unhappy. They believed that if the stalks of paddy took firm root during Hathiya, the crop would still yield well.

Only some worried that the higher fields had dried up. The lower plots still held water, but the upper ones had drained quickly. Water had escaped through the furrows, through the holes of crabs and rats, and within three days of the rains stopping, the upper fields had turned dry.

Even so, the villagers were delighted about the coming Dussehra fair. Fairgoers and traders alike hoped for a clear sky, for in dry weather the dancers and performers could entertain freely, and crowds would gather again. The previous year had been a disaster. On the very day the fair opened, the sky had burst with wind and rain, and the celebration had drowned in mud.

Now, in this welcome spell of clear days, Mahakant lay stretched on his cot, lost in thought. Since the day he had started his brick kiln, such perfect timing had never come. In earlier years, he would begin work only after Diwali, but this time fortune favoured him. Before Diwali itself, he could fire two full rounds of bricks. The government's schemes would help too, the new road plan, the Indira Awas houses, the schools and hospitals being built not only in his own village but in neighbouring ones. Demand for bricks would stay high all year. There would be no shortage of work or money.

As these thoughts crossed his mind, a quiet smile spread across his face. Just then, his wife Ragini came in with his morning tea and stood silently by the bed, watching his expression. Seeing him smiling to himself, she wondered what pleasant thought had crossed his mind. Without speaking, she placed the tea on the small table, turned, and swayed slightly as she walked away, her anklets faintly ringing.

Her soft gesture made Mahakant sit up at once. He looked toward her, smiled mischievously, and motioned with his eyes for her to come and sit beside him. Seeing her husband's mood, Ragini hesitated for a moment, then quietly slipped away.

Mahakant and Ragini had studied together in college. Their love began during their Bachelor's years. Both came from prosperous families. Academically, they weren't brilliant, yet their results were

always impressive, first division in both Matriculation and Intermediate. It wasn't due to hard work but rather family influence and privilege. Because of their grades, they were respected among classmates and even teachers.

Their relationship began during their B.A. Honours course. The Honours class had few students, so there was more time to talk. What started as casual conversation soon grew into companionship. They began visiting each other's rooms to study together. Gradually, their bond deepened. They went to the market together, not only for books and notebooks but also for clothes and shoes. Later, they started watching movies, and physical intimacy entered their relationship.

Eventually, they rented a double-bedded room and began living together. Their closeness soon became an open secret, not only among students and teachers but even reaching both families. But the two fathers saw things differently. Mahakant's father, Sudhir, considered youthful love a passing distraction, while Ragini's father, Ramanand, saw in Mahakant a wealthy, educated groom who could secure his daughter's future.

After completing their Master's degrees, the two families agreed, and Mahakant and Ragini were married. Sudhir's household was an old, landowning family. He lived mostly alone among his brothers and had only one son, Mahakant. His four daughters were already married and settled. Mahakant showed little interest in family responsibilities. He spent his days gambling and drinking with friends, which his father silently tolerated for a while.

Sudhir managed a moneylending business and spent his days calculating loans and handling property accounts. Watching his son's aimless routine, one day he lost patience and said, "Son, money is hard to earn. If you keep wasting your days like this, Goddess Lakshmi will not stay long with you. Do something useful."

Mahakant listened quietly, saying nothing. Seeing him silent, Sudhir continued, "I'll give you five lakh rupees. Start a brick kiln. We have twenty bighas of high land north of the village, set it up there."

"Alright," Mahakant replied simply, and fell silent again.

In Sudhir's mind, the plan seemed perfect. Once his son took up real work, he would change, because a brick kiln, he believed, was not merely a factory. It was a place that made men; it turned a person into a person.

Like every other year, Bachanu began his routine work, tending the kiln, visiting the market, and carrying a bottle of brandy to Mahakant's wife, Ragini.

Mahakant too followed his usual pattern. Every morning, after breakfast at eight, he would ride his motorcycle to the brick kiln. There, the three of them, Mahakant, Sarup Munshi, and Bachanu, would smoke marijuana until their heads grew light. After smoking, Mahakant would lie down and sleep in his office. Around noon, Bachanu would wake him. Mahakant would ask the Munshi for money and send Bachanu to the market to buy brandy, while he washed his face, ate lunch, and went home. After eating, he would return to the kiln, only to fall asleep again until four in the evening. Meanwhile, Bachanu would deliver the bottle of brandy to Ragini at home. Since their college days, both husband and wife had been drinkers. Ragini confined herself to brandy, but Mahakant drank everything, marijuana, bhang, English liquor, local brews, even toddy or opium, whatever he could find, he consumed without restraint.

That day, when Bachanu arrived with the bottle of brandy, Ragini looked at him differently. Usually, she would take the bottle silently and set it aside. But today, with an unexpected gentleness, she gestured for him to sit on the edge of the bed. Bachanu hesitated, then sat down. They now faced each other.

Ragini said, "For a long time I've wanted to talk to you properly. But you always come and go in such a hurry that I never get the chance."

Bachanu replied, "Madam, I'm just a simple man, and you're educated. How could I answer what you might want to talk about?"

Ragini smiled faintly, "Who said I'm going to debate with you? I just want to speak my heart. Everyone has his own sorrow."

Hearing the phrase sorrow of the heart, Bachanu grew puzzled. We, poor people have our troubles, he thought- hunger, debt, pain.

But she? She has everything- good food, fine clothes, a comfortable life and an educated husband. What sorrow could she have?

Even so, her tone stirred something uneasy inside him. He looked toward her face. The brightness that once made her glow seemed dim now, like the sun sinking behind clouds. A soft weariness spread over her features, and Bachanu felt a strange mix of curiosity and pity rise within him. Ragini said softly, "You live a far better life than I do."

Hearing himself praised, Bachanu felt an unexpected thrill. His eyes widened, his chest swelled. Strange thoughts began to rise in his mind, thoughts he had never allowed himself before. Yet he remained silent, unsure what to say. Seeing his alertness, Ragini continued, "You're like a bird flying free in the open sky, while I'm a bird trapped in a cage. When I was studying, I dreamed of becoming a professor in some college, of spending my life among books and people. But all that stayed only in my mind. Now I spend my days enclosed in this courtyard, surrounded by walls. I speak to no one, and I can't step outside alone. We have no one else at home, not even a mother-in-law or any relatives nearby. It's a lonely house.

Lying here all day, my body aches, my hands grow numb. When I used to study, the world looked different, bright, and full of meaning. Now it feels hollow. Sometimes I pick up a book, sometimes I just stare at the television. What's the use of reading? There's no one to share what I learn, and nothing to apply it to. Life has become worse than that of an animal. Like a cow tied to its post, eating and chewing the same cud all day, that's what I've become.

But a human being isn't made only for eating and breathing. Until one speaks what's inside the heart and listens to what's inside another's, life can't feel right. Often I think, if one must live tracing the same old lines, why do people even study? What good is education if it only teaches us how to stay silent?"

Bachanu smiled gently and said, "Madam, what could you possibly lack that would make you unhappy?"

Ragini replied, "What you said is true. Many people think that money is everything. But money feeds only the body, not the heart. It has been more than three years since I came here and I have not seen

a single film, nor gone anywhere for a day's outing. As long as a daughter lives with her parents, wealth, property, kinship and family appear to be hers. But once she goes to her in-laws, those freedoms vanish, "At this Bachnu dared to ask," If you want to go somewhere or see someone, why don't you go to your parent's house?"

Ragini unveiled her heart, "At my parents' home I was a daughter; at my in-laws I have become a daughter-in-law. Now when I am married, I am treated as a guest in my parents' home. Even the mother who gave regards thinks me an outsider.Ihave to live in the reign of brother and his wife. That is the story of my natal home. What happens here, I alone endure. When the family oldman comes into the courtyard, it appears as if eighty maunds of water have been poured over him. The elder woman may smile and speak a little, but she will scold me at the slightest look. If my head is not veiled, I will be reproached through her. Tears pour out of my eyes like a mountain spring all day long. No one comes to wipe them."

Bachanu said, "Madam, it is getting late. Mahakant Bhai will be upset."

Ragini answered, "All right, you will go soon. I keep thinking all the time that if only I had the courage, I would, like Lakshmi Bai, raise the sword and break the veil and curtain. But I have no courage. My heart trembles like the leaf of a banana tree. Today, having told you what was in my heart, I feel a little relief."

Bachanu said, "Then I am better than you."

Ragini said, "Yes, you are much better. Speaking with you like this appears to me as if the pain of a festering wound has been plucked out and there is at last a breath of ease. From now on we will talk for an hour every day. You are not a stranger but a member of this family."

For a long moment, Bachanu and Ragini looked into each other's eyes. Bachanu read Ragini's heart as though it were an open page, and Ragini read Bachanu's heart in the same way. ❑

The Lime Hawker

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As soon as Makhni woke up, she folded her bedding made of mothi grass and leaned it upright in the northeastern corner of the verandah. She had just begun to descend the stairs when her foot slipped. She tried to catch the edge of the verandah to steady herself, but before her hand could reach, she lost balance and fell straight down.

It was still dawn; no one else in the house had woken yet. A short while earlier there had been a drizzle, and drops of water were still dripping from the eaves. When she slipped from the stairs, the joint of her right knee twisted sharply. At first, she did not realize how bad it was, only that her knee had given way. She thought: If no one has seen me, let me get up quickly. So she tried to rise. But as soon as she stood, the pain shot up her leg. She clutched the verandah post and sat back down on the step.

Sitting there, she began to think: How will Matkuria's household run now? She has a young daughter to marry, with no steady income, no land, no crops. My daughter-in-law is bulky and slugish. And in this village, no one wishes anyone well. O Lord, what calamity have you sent upon me?

She sat silent for a moment, then called out loudly, "Matkuria! O Matkuria!"

Matkuria lived with his wife and their two children. The whole family was fast asleep, so no one heard the first call. She shouted again, louder this time, "O son, son! I've fallen down and can't get up!"

Startled, Matkuria leapt from the bed. "Ma! I'm coming!" he cried.

By then, Phuliya, Kabutariya, and the son had also woken. Matkuria opened the door and ran to his mother. “How did you fall, Ma?” he asked, his voice trembling.

The others followed quickly behind. The little boy, barely five years old, tried to help too, holding on to his grandmother’s arm like the elders. Together they lifted Makhni and carried her to the verandah. They spread a mat and laid her down gently. Her knee had already begun to swell.

Seeing it, Phuliya said to her husband, “Go, call the doctor right away. I’ll rub oil on her knee in the meantime.”

Turning to her daughter, she added, “Buchchi, go inside and bring the bottle of oil.”

Matkuriya had already left for the doctor. Kabutariya ran to fetch the bottle of oil. Meanwhile the little son said, “Oh old woman, how did you fall from so high?”

Phuliya covered her son’s mouth with her hand to stop him from speaking, but Makhni felt no shame at the child’s question. She smiled and said, “I just slipped.”

Before the oil bottle could be opened Kabutariya returned. The two women together anointed the injured place, wrapping the right thigh and knee with oil and rubbing gently. The pain in Makhni’s joint kept growing. The women, seeing this, stopped their gossip and called for the doctor. Soon the doctor arrived with Matkuriya. Looking at Makhni’s knee, he said, “Her joint is dislocated. We must set it and plaster it. I will give an injection to reduce the pain. You must get plastering materials.”

People from the nearby village began to arrive. Women came with their children. The courtyard was filled with neighbours. Someone brought the doctor the tools and supplies. The doctor began to work and reassured everyone, “Do not worry. She will recover in about fifteen days.”

He took his fee and left, but people kept coming and going. The courtyard buzzed with talk of many colours and kinds.

All that day the lime-seller household went hungry. No one tended the cooking, no one noticed the empty stomachs. Only the

children's playthings remained in the yard. The five of them stayed gathered in the courtyard, uneasy and restless.

Restlessness bred plans. Matkuriya, Phuliya and Kabutariya each thought over things in their own way. In the past, whenever a quarrel flared or someone went away to the market, Phuliya would go to sell lime. She knew the work, so she did not worry much about it. The only real worry now was how to keep the mother alive and well. Yet she had reason to be happy. She had been living with the in-laws for sixteen years without ever becoming the household's head. She saw that the mother-in-law was weakening. Perhaps now the house would accept a new head.

If fate turned, she thought, she too could become the one who would manage the house. Running a household was not merely about earning money. It was about the claim and the right to do the work. If someone took the reins without having earned it, people would either push him aside or not accept him. Work had its own rules, which those who knew it understood. If someone who had not toiled tried to take charge, either he would be driven away or he would soon be exposed.

Even though Phuliya's husband and mother-in-law were still alive, she knew that becoming the true head of the household would not be easy. Still, she held hope. Until now she had lived by pleasing others, wearing her vermilion and bindi, always smiling to keep peace, but now she wouldn't have to do that. That thought made her secretly happy.

Kabutariya too felt a strange kind of satisfaction. Her grandmother Makhni possessed every skill the village women admired, she knew how to mix lime perfectly, how to judge measure by eye, how to sell with a gentle word. Yet the old woman's obsession with work was so strong that she would probably stop only when her last breath came. Kabutariya thought: Now when she's bedridden, I can learn from her properly. Once she starts staying at home, I'll learn every trick she knows.

She felt no anger toward her grandmother. It was only natural that carrying ten seers of lime paste on her head every day would strain her body. By evening she would return exhausted and lie still,

unable to move. That won't happen anymore, Kabutariya thought. Now I'll learn the customs and songs for every festival, how to prepare for puja, how to draw aripan at weddings. I've grown up, yet I don't know a single full song or even how to make proper wedding patterns. I've long wanted to draw vines and flower motifs on the courtyard wall like Malti does at her in-laws', but for that you need to learn. Every evening I try to sit with Dadi, but she falls asleep as soon as she lies down. And if I ask questions, she mixes one song with another, one verse into another. I never really learn anything.

Matkuriya, on the other hand, felt a quiet relief. It pained him to see his old mother still labouring while he, his wife, and children looked on helpless. But what could he say? He had two children; his daughter had attained marriageable age but his mother still thought of him as a child. What could he do? He continued to think: Whatever God does must be right. At least now Ma will not have to carry heavy loads. If she speaks, I'll listen. If she warns me, I'll obey. Who among the old doesn't fear death? And for the aged, that fear comes even closer.

It was for this reason that Matkuriya felt a quiet joy rising within him.He thought that people might think of him as a drunkard, a fool, but he was really not so. Let them think what they liked. Since his father's death, every burden had fallen on his shoulders. Who else had managed things if not he?

He thought: Yes, I drink sometimes. But what of it? Do I sit with loafers and thieves, learning to steal? No. I drink alone or in the company of respectable men. From great men, you learn wisdom.

He remembered Ramanand Babu, the most learned man in the region, with whom he shared a kind of friendship. Once, Ramanand Babu had told him, "As a person is born, grows, becomes young, grows old, and finally dies, so runs the order of the world. It happens to everyone. Those who don't understand this, understand nothing. But those who do, live at peace."

Matkuriya had taken those words to heart.

His eyes then drifted to his mother lying with her broken leg. Her fall is not some disaster, he thought. It's just God's doing. God never punishes without reason. Perhaps this too has meaning. So why

should I grieve? Life goes on as it always has. The days before will return again.

Just as I used to bring home the packets of lime after selling them with Ma, now I'll do the same for my wife. Let anyone show me a single day I missed work. Even when I'm drunk, when I'm away, when I've spent the night in a haze, I've never once neglected my duty.

With that thought, he looked around the quiet courtyard. A faint pride stirred in him, not for what he had gained, but for what he had endured.

The livelihood of Matkuriya's family had always been lime, Chun. It was a woman-centered trade. Lime selling took place from courtyard to courtyard, door to door. It was a simple, local craft, self-contained and independent. Nothing had to be brought from outside, nor was there difficulty in selling. Almost every household in the village used lime. Some needed it for betel leaves, others for chewing tobacco. In both, lime was essential.

Making lime was no hard task. It was prepared by burning conch shell in earthen ovens, much like miniature granaries. The lime kiln resembled a grain store, though with one difference: the grain store had a narrow mouth on top for pouring grain in, while the lime kiln's top remained open to allow the smoke to rise freely. The lower openings of both were alike.

There was never any shortage of raw material. Poor villagers often ate snail flesh, the edible coating formed on the lumps. It was considered pure, for the doka itself lived on the soil. Lime was made from the upper, burnt part of the doka, the hardened part of this small watery creature.

The village itself was their market. There were hardly any homes where lime wasn't needed. Matkuriya's grandmother and great-grandmother had both sold lime, and after their deaths, his mother carried on the trade. Five days a week she roamed from village to village, each day fixed for a particular place. Every household bought lime roughly once a week. There was no haggling, no written accounts, everything ran on trust and habit. Quantities were measured by estimation, and so was payment, often in paddy or

millet.

In this modest life, ambition had little place. There were no dreams of wealth or luxury, only the quiet wish to live with dignity.

Even in trade, there was no competition, no quarrel, and no greed. The old caste order still held firm. Each caste kept to its hereditary work: the scavenger, the barber, the washerman, the carpenter, the potter, each had his professional livelihood and each kept to it strictly.Society itself was the judge and enforcer. If anyone crossed the line, there would be open arbitration between the castes. So everyone stayed within their boundary.

Yes, within a boundary there could be division among brothers, but Matkuriya's family was a single line of descent. So there were no disputes. Their work remained steady and undivided. Every family had its own fixed area of trade, and no one else could enter it. Yet, when necessity arose, sickness, death, or some social duty, they helped one another, carrying each other's burdens without conflict.

Such was the quiet rhythm of the chunwali family's life: humble, contained, and bound by work that was as steady as the white dust of lime itself.

Makhni didn't just sell lime to feed her family, she was also a small-scale moneylender in her own right. Every bit of her capital was born from labour. She collected dokas with her own hands, burned them into lime, and bartered that lime for grain. Prices were never fixed. In poorer households, she charged less; among the better-off, she would ask a little more. Hers was a family of five, how much could they eat? Whatever surplus grain she earned, she lent out quietly, without written records or accounts. Her word was enough. Some borrowers repaid, some didn't; what mattered to her was the flow of trust, not the arithmetic of profit.

Her trade stretched across five villages. That was all she could manage. To collect the dokas, burn them into lime, and make her weekly rounds took two full days of work for each batch. It was enough to circle through those same five villages once every eight days. Expanding the business would have required more strength and more time, neither of which she had.

When her leg failed, Makhni stopped selling. But the trade did not die with her. Phuliya, her daughter-in-law, took up the work. The villages already knew her face, and the buyers trusted her name, so business continued without trouble. Only the moneylending declined. Each of the five villages had kept its little stores of paddy and millet with Makhni. Once she stopped travelling, those deposits remained untouched; both lender and borrower slowly forgot their accounts.

Yet Makhni felt no regret. On the contrary, she was content. What more could a person want, she thought, than to have fed not only her own but also others while she had the strength? That alone is religion, the duty of a life well lived. I've done that. My old age is blessed.

Time, meanwhile, moved on, reshaping everything. Business changed, as it must. No season stayed steady. Some years the rains were heavy and dokas multiplied in the damp clay; other years the sun burned hard and the soil cracked. A trade that depended on earth and weather could not remain the same.

Then came the stone-lime from the market, ready, cheap, and abundant. The whole rhythm of the village economy shifted. Demand grew from new corners: not only elders chewing betel and tobacco, but also schoolboys, college youth, even child labourers who had picked up the habit. Every crossroads now had a tea-pan stall. Public festivals multiplied. Family ceremonies, weddings, head-shaving feasts, funeral rituals, grew larger, noisier, more demanding.

With every betel leaf rolled and every mouth stained red, the need for lime grew. What had once been a quiet village trade had now become a small industry. The white dust that once clung only to Makhni's hands had spread across the region. It was a proof that even the humblest work, in time, can leave its mark.

Phuliya took Makhni's place. Since it was a family trade, she hardly needed to learn anything new. Everything was already in her hands and in her habit. Even while her mother-in-law was alive, she used to help with the selling.Whenever Makhni went to her naihar (parental home), Phuliya would take over the day's round, gathering dokas and burning them into lime.

But now the very nature of lime-making had changed. People

had shifted from earthen doka lime to stone lime. The old folk still preferred the doka kind, calling the stone lime weak and lifeless. “The fire that blazes in doka lime,” they said, “never burns in stone.” Yet, what can a defeated performer do but bow to the crowd?

Even the manner of selling changed. What was once sold by rough measure and trust now had to be weighed precisely on scales. Cash replaced grain. The barter system hadn’t vanished entirely, but its share had shrunk to a token. Now only a little grain came in, just enough for the household to use. The rest of the earnings were kept neatly: the cash in the blouse-pocket, the grain in the corner bin. Moneylending, too, had almost disappeared. People no longer needed to borrow; time itself had moved forward.

Farming had improved. The sowing was better; harvests richer. The new generation of farmers had money in their hands, and with that, new thoughts in their heads. Ideas were changing, not just the times. Trade grew easier. With each passing year, Matkuriya’s family moved a little further ahead. Only Matkuriya himself remained much the same. In the old days, he had helped his mother gather dokas from the fields; now he simply went to the market and bought the ready-made lime, dry, fine, and pure, no need for the smoke and sweat of the old kilns. Mixing it into paste took no trouble at all.

It was the month of Phagun, three days after Shivaratri. It was the season of weddings and feasts. The whole countryside seemed to be in motion, as if a fair were passing through, the air full of brass-band notes and loudspeakers blaring film songs.

Usually Matkuriya went to the kiln at four, but that morning he left early. The weather was soft and cheerful; a light breeze whispered through the palms, and the trees themselves seemed to sway to its rhythm. Birds were singing as if to greet the sun.

Reaching the toddy shop, the pasi (brewer) came out with a grin, “Brother, today we’ve got the good stuff, fresh basanti brew. Want the khajuriya or the taadi?”

Hearing the pasi’s words, Matkuriya felt a flicker of joy rise within him. He thought to himself: I’ll have two extra glasses today. After all, it’s a good day to begin the journey. He said aloud, “Then today’s brew must be just right.”

The pasi smiled, “You’re an old and loyal customer, brother. Two glasses are free for you today.”

The thought of free drinks made Matkuriya grin. If it’s the first day, he reasoned, how can I take less than usual? A journey always starts best with a good omen. Nodding cheerfully, he said, “Fine then, pour your free glasses also in my drinks.”

The pale golden basanti taadi went down smooth and sweet. With every sip, the warmth spread through him, loosening his limbs and brightening his thoughts. After finishing, he walked straight out of the pasi’s shed, heading southward from the kiln toward home. His wife must be on her way from the next village, carrying the load of lime on her head.

At the southern boundary of the village, he stopped near a spreading pakhar tree and looked ahead. As far as his eyes could see, there was no sign of her. He stood for a while, the faint spring breeze brushing his face, the music of brass bands and loudspeakers drifting through the air, wedding songs, film tunes, all mingling in a restless rhythm. Something stirred in him the memory of his own wedding-the songs, the noise, the laughter and above all, the first sight of Phuliya. Her face rose before him now, bright and young as it had been then. Why wait idly here? He thought. Better to walk on and meet her halfway.

He started forward. After a few turns along the dusty path, he saw her, Phuliya, crossing from the far end of the next hamlet, a basket balanced steady on her head. The load was heavy but her steps were even, her body swaying with quiet rhythm.

She too had seen him. Both quickened their pace, he from eagerness, she from relief. Matkuriya thought only of easing her burden; she thought only of reaching him, to share the weight and the silence between them. When they met, he adjusted the fold of his dhoti at the waist, freeing his hands. For a moment he looked at her, sweat darkening her blouse, the line of effort still trembling in her shoulders. Without a word, he untied his gamchha, twisted it into a padded ring, and placed it on his head. Then, gently lifting the basket from hers, he settled it on his own. For an instant, he felt like saying something, some small, tender word. But the words never came. She’s

tired, he thought, let her rest. Maybe later.

The sun hung low and golden over the fields as the two walked side by side–she lighter, he steadier–both silent, both thinking of many things, neither could quite say.

As soon as the load lifted from her head, Phuliya felt a sudden lightness spread through her body. But she said nothing, her limbs still stiff from the weight. Without a word, the two began walking home. With every step, her body loosened and her mind grew easier; his, heavier.

Matkuriya wanted to speak, to say something simple, maybe even tender, but the thought faded. He felt as though any word might only add to the weight pressing on him. He kept quiet. She too remained silent, though a kind of calm had begun to return to her body. Husband and wife walked side by side, their silence full but untroubled. Between them, the air seemed to thrum with the rhythm of the road, the creak of his shoulders, and the soft slap of her feet on dust.

There is a kind of joy that comes only when two hearts move in the same quiet balance, not too happy, not too sad. Until now, that balance had never truly come between them. By this time the basket's weight had been on her head; now it was on his. The exchange had brought a strange stillness to both. Neither spoke, yet a faint smile escaped both mouths at the same moment.

Matkuriya, shifting the basket slightly, turned back to glance at her. She was smiling. Phuliya, catching his look, saw that he was smiling too. For an instant they stared straight into each other's eyes, long enough to see, not the road or the burden, but the long, shared life that had brought them here.

And in that unspoken moment, it seemed as if the silence itself had learned to speak. ❑

Division of the Ancestral Homestead

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It was the day of the ancestral homestead land division. From four in the morning, the fragrance of puri, jalebi, and vegetables spread through the air of the village. Everyone knew the reason, so no one was surprised by the smell. Before sunrise, Shrikant's and Mukund's wives went to pluck flowers, take a bath, and offer prayers at the shrine of Lord Barham.

The cook worked beside two stoves. On one, the vegetables simmered; on the other, jalebis sizzled in ghee. Sitting on a chair nearby, Shrikant silently made a vow to Barham Baba that if the land was measured and divided to his satisfaction, he would sacrifice a pair of goats. Mukund made the same promise in his heart.

The air of the village was filled with excitement and festivity. The tea makers were busy brewing, and the betel servers arranged their trays. Two large tents were pitched on opposite sides of the courtyard, with mats and rugs spread across the ground. One area was for those who smoked cannabis, the other for those who drank. Buchai moved from one group to another, checking on the cook at times, then stopping by the drinkers for a few gulps. Sarup did the same, restless and curious.

Both Buchai and Sarup had arranged food items and their supplies for their sides the previous day, so there was no need to fetch anything from outside today. Tea and paan were in endless supply. Anyone could eat or drink as they pleased. Breakfast consisted of puris, jalebis, and vegetable curry; lunch was goat meat curry with fragrant rice cooked with basil flowers. The worries of the day had disappeared, and everyone walked about cheerfully, eating and drinking freely.

Shrikant and Mukund were both engineers from the same lineage. Their great-grandfathers were brothers. The ancestral house stood on five kathas of land, and each had half. From the day they began working, both had left the village. The family line was old and thin, with no other descendants. During thirty-five years of service, neither had returned home. The house their fathers had built slowly decayed in their absence.

The village women laid aside their finery and, with quick, efficient hands, swept the courtyards clean. The boys of Seriya made the open field their own. Each group of players claimed a patch for its game. One patch became a kabaddi ground, another a guddi-gudi field, a third for chickka-chikka, the fourth for gulli-danda, and the fifth for a game of rob-the-handkerchief. The boys who gathered would, late at night, run through one another's fields and reshape the boundaries. But before the play began they scolded and chided each other until each patch lay smooth and ready.

Although both landowners, Shrikant and Mukund had built houses away from the village, their thoughts turned homeward when they reached the evening of their lives.After years of work they had saved enough to take three months' leave and return. Before they came they had fixed the arrival day by phone. They did not want any last-minute quarrels over measurements. Ten days before the partition of the homestead, Shrikant reached the village. He had not come empty-handed. Along with a few household necessities and bedding, he brought tools and pots for the kitchen. On arriving he left arrangements to his younger brother.After settling there he asked his younger brother, "Boy, who in the village work as middlemen to earn money?"

The brother replied, "There is no politician here, but Buchai and Sarup run schemes."

"What sort of schemes?"

"Like this. If someone buys or sells a field, they step in and take a cut. They do the same with cattle and buffaloes. They take a little here and there, through favours and connections, and keep themselves afloat."

Hearing this, the engineer felt a momentary unease. He thought

for a while, then said, “Call Buchai over, will you?”

“Of course,” the brother answered.

The brother went off to call Buchai. Sitting alone, Shrikant was lost in his thoughts.He reflected that everyone in the village seemed caught in the same struggle. Each home mirrored its people. The few brick houses he had seen looked no better than patched huts. He decided he would build something grand, something that would make not only his own village but even the neighbouring ones come to see it.

He remembered what the elders used to say: move with the wind that blows. This was the age of money. Whoever had money was wise; whoever did not was nothing. A poor man, no matter how old, remained a failure. The one who had money built good houses, rode fine vehicles, sent his children to good schools and colleges, dressed his family well, and married his sons and daughters into good families. Even the comforts that science had created for all were enjoyed only by those with wealth. That, he thought, was what it meant to keep up with the times.

Earning respect in society was easy. Earn money by any means, feed the people, and your name would spread. Wealth brought honour; honour brought reputation. He already had enough money. He would now let the villagers see it. His children were educated and well married. Only one thing remained, social prestige. That, too, he would now secure.

He was still lost in thought when his brother returned with Buchai. As soon as Buchai came near, he joined his hands and said, “I bow to you, uncle. You had forgotten the village, I thought. When one has government quarters with air conditioning, who would come back to mud and mosquitoes?”

Hiding his real thoughts, Shrikant said softly, “No, son, it isn’t that. The day I began my job, I became another man’s servant. Whatever the master ordered, I had to obey. You’re young, you haven’t seen it, but I have lived through the British rule. Governance has many layers; not everyone understands how it works. The kings and landlords of this region were the Britishers’ tail-wagging servants. And the way they treated the common people here, you’ve

seen traces of that even now. But let's leave all that. I called you for something else.

I still have a year of service left. After retirement, I plan to live here in the village. That's why I've taken three months' leave, to have the ancestral land measured and to build a house. Without a house, where will one live?"

Buchai nodded, "That's necessary, no doubt. But why did you call me?"

Changing his tone, Shrikant replied, "I've already informed Mukundji. He'll be here tomorrow or the day after. There are only two of us with claim to this ancestral plot, so both must be present. You may not know, but my great-grandfather and Mukund's great-grandfather were brothers. Each inherited two and a half kathas of land. I want you to arrange things so that I get three kathas."

Buchai read the greed in Shrikant's eyes. Smiling knowingly, he said, "Oh, so that's what's troubling you. Don't worry, it's an easy job. We'll get the surveyor on our side and everything will go as you wish. The man usually hides five to ten dhurs of land while measuring, but that can be managed, with some expense, of course. I'll arrange everything, but the cost will be yours."

Shrikant, warmed by the thought of money's power, smiled in return. It stung his pride that though Mukund was also an engineer with the same salary, Mukund might still outdo him in wealth and status. Grinning, he said, "Buchai, I'm ready to pay whatever expenditure it incurs. With your skill and my money, you have to bring me home the victory."

Buchai felt a quiet thrill at Shrikant's words. A good opportunity had come his way. Wealth would pass through his hands. Oh, he had not read the paper in many days, but the sight of money felt auspicious. Carried away, Buchai said, "Uncle, money can move mountains. This is only the entrusted share. Whatever you wish will be done. Just do not be stingy."

Hearing the word stinginess, Shrikant replied, "A man must speak with courage. What I promise, I will never go back on."

Shrikant took five thousand rupees from his bag and handed

them to Buchai. Tucking the cash into his pocket, Buchai bowed and left. Buchai was skilled in the village's tricks, yet he never nourished any thoughts of improperiety in society. Whenever a crooked job came up, he would consult Guru Kaka. As he walked home he began to plan. This time he would teach him a lesson he would remember until death. He would learn how one has to pay for the act of bribery from the government treasury and contractors.

Reaching the courtyard of his home Buchai gave four thousand rupees to his wife and kept one thousand for himself. The sight of that bundle made the couple as delighted as farmers seeing their harvested paddy. Yet their joy had different causes. A farmer's happiness comes from the fruit of labour, while Buchai's joy came from brokerage and commission. Smiling, Buchai told his wife, "There is a bottle by the window. Bring it."

His wife, bright-eyed, replied, "Why should I bring a bottle at the time of eating and drinking at night?"

Buchai said, "Bring the bottle and bring something to eat also. They will go together. Until the heart is filled, the mood will not come. There are many things to think about. Do you not understand what I mean?"

His wife answered, "Why must I understand your talk? I myself feel a bit unwell. My body wavers."

"All right, fine. You will take two swigs too."

At dawn Buchai reached the village square. At the center of the village stood the chaubatti, a four-way crossroad lined with thirty or forty tiny shops. Ten or twelve were proper houses, the rest were bamboo stalls. None of the shops was large, yet they sold everything a villager might need, so few ever went to the distant market. Only when a family had a major event, a wedding or a funeral, did they need to go to town. The shops stayed open all day, though real crowds gathered only in the evening. During the day the people worked in their fields, then came here at dusk to trade. Only tea and betel were sold briskly from morning till night.

Reaching the square, Buchai handed one rupee each to the two tea sellers, sat on a bench, and ordered tea for everyone. There were

three groups who smoked cannabis at the square. After drinking tea and chewing betel, Buchai joined the group with the chillum (Smoking pipe), took two deep puffs, and handed fifty rupees to each group to buy their share of ganja. Their faces lit up in delight. Smiling, Buchai rose and walked toward the surveyor's house.

There were three surveyors in the village, Ramchandra, Khushilal, and Kisundev. People called all three "Ameen," but only Ramchandra had actually studied the trade. After finishing middle school, he had been unable to enroll in high school. There was no school nearby in those days; the nearest one was across the river in another district. His father was too poor to send him away.

Fifteen years ago, a surveyor from Muzaffarpur had come to the village and opened a short-term training school in land measurement. The course lasted six months and covered four subjects, measurement, geometry, land law, and consolidation. The teacher carried all the standard tools: theodolite, compass, measuring chain, scale, lens, right angle, plane table, pins, and measuring tape. He charged five rupees a month. The school was held in the courtyard of Madhukant, who provided food to the teacher in exchange for lessons. Students came from the surrounding villages; altogether fifteen young men studied there. But as land-survey work was rare, all except Ramchandra soon gave it up.

A surveyor from Begusarai arrived a month before the official survey and began selling certificates for five hundred rupees a piece. Khushilal and Kisundev bought certificates from him too. Survey work spread through the village. As soon as the maps began to be drawn, brokerage began. People started paying to have their field plans enlarged. Local brokers were the ameen and the government surveyor. Khushilal and Kisundev immediately set to work and profited, while Ramchandra hung back.

People began selling cows, buffaloes, trees and other assets and giving away cash. Ramchandra stayed quiet, but Khushilal and Kisundev made their money. The people often offered them tea and betel and called out "Ameen sahab, ameen sahab" to show respect. The two men arranged installment payments and pushed the paperwork through documents, certifications and entries up to section

three, then sections six, eight and nine, padding fees along the way. That extra income soon paid for motorbike maintenance.

Going to Khushilal Buchai appointed him as the surveyor for Shrikant's side. In addition to the official survey fee, Khushilal collected extra charges on behalf of the party. The next day Mukund arrived in the village. He had come from the town with everything arranged. He had two men standing by to prepare food and tend to guests. As people began to gather, Mukund asked, "Who is running things in the village?"

At Mukund's question someone nearby called out Buchai's name. Hearing that, Mukund summoned him. The two men took their leave. One went to a house, the other to Buchai's courtyard. Meanwhile Mukund told his wife, "Prepare some tea." She set about making it. The whistle on the pressure cooker hissed and she muttered, "For whom did we build a three-room house?"

Those words struck Mukund like a blow. A burning ache rose in his chest and tears came to his eyes. He wiped them with his handkerchief and thought to himself: How could he tell anyone about this defeat? He had never imagined that an educated person could behave so low. He had worked so hard to educate his son. He had given him a job. He had arranged a good marriage for him. And yet the result was the opposite. If educated people treated their elders like this, what were people to do? Maybe it would be better to die. But death is not so simple, and fate is not for any person to change. If misfortune is written in old age, someone will divide it; that is the line fate has drawn, who can alter it?

Mukund sat picking at his betel, humming under his breath. His wife's eyes stayed fixed on the pressure cooker, but her heart trembled like a peepal leaf in no wind, quivering without rest. Tears welled in her eyes and slid down like water over a flat field.

Tea was ready. The two men sat facing each other and began to sip. Each took a sip and glanced at the other, but neither spoke. It appeared as if something heavy stirred in both their chests. Mukund drank two long pulls and then set his cup aside. Just then Buchai arrived. He folded his hands, greeted both men and sat down.

Seeing Buchai, Mukund tried to steady himself and said to his

wife, “The weariness of the whole day breaks the body into pieces. It unsettles the mind. Bring a bottle, just a small one. Nothing will be done until we have a drink.”

At his words his wife took a one-liter branded bottle and two glasses from the cupboard and set them on the low wooden table surrounded by the three persons they sat like the points of a triangle around it. Mukund opened the bottle and poured brandy into two glasses. He kept one for himself and pushed the other toward Buchai.

Buchai’s face brightened at the sight of the brandy, but out of habit with strangers he protested, “Uncle, I do not drink such things. Where would I get this in the village? We are poor. If we ever want a drink we smoke a chillum. Sometimes we chew a little hemp paste. That is enough for us.”

Mukund insisted, “This is like fruit juice. It is not some crude country liquor that will harm you.”

Mukund had already decided that liquor would loosen Buchai’s tongue. Unless he heard what truly went on in the village, it would be hard to act. The two men emptied their glasses. Then Mukund took out a pack of cigarettes and a matchbox, lit one, and offered another to Buchai. Both smoked in silence for a while. Blowing out a thin trail of smoke, Mukund said, “Buchai, I am growing old. You young men are the ones who must carry the village and the country forward. Life in the city has wearied me. There is still a year left in service, but I wish retirement should come sooner so that I could live here among my own people. Yet I have nothing here, only a small ancestral plot where I want to build a house. You must help me a little.”

Buchai said, “I’ll help in whatever way I can. But, uncle, you’ve earned enough in the city. Why do you need help from anyone?”

Mukund smiled faintly, “You know how it is. I’ve lived in air-conditioned rooms, ridden in good cars, moved among fine people. That kind of life has its price.”

Buchai replied, “But you won’t be farming or tending cattle. You only need a place to live. That small homestead is enough.”

Mukund leaned forward, “You’re right, but to live properly, I

must build. There's no electricity here, so I'll need a generator. No water supply, so I'll need a tank and a motor. I'll need a garage, a bathing room with the toilet, a garden in front, a few decimals of land for flowers and a platform to sit on. A boundary wall too. All that will take space."

Buchai nodded slowly, "Of course, you'll need land. But what are you asking of me?"

Mukund said carefully, "I'm saying that I have only two and a half kathas. How can all this fit there? Somehow arrange for me to get ten extra dhurs."

The request made Buchai's lips twitch with hidden laughter, but he controlled it and said, "Listen, uncle, those ten dhurs lie in the surveyor's hands, but it will happen only if both the local panchayat and the surveyor stand on your side."

Mukund said, "That is exactly why I appealed to you. I do not know anyone here. You know everyone. So help me as if I were your own."

Buchai understood at once that this was an easy mark, like a domesticated cow to be milked. He grinned and replied, "Listen, uncle, the village is poor. People take sides for their own reasons. For them you and Shrikant both look like big men. Who would refuse a leader if he comes bearing sweets?"

Mukund said, "Then I am ready. I will do whatever you tell me."

Buchai chuckled inwardly, then spoke more plainly. "Okay. I will go around talking up your case. But remember, Shrikant talked to me yesterday. I told him I too would be present here on the day of division. So I will have some trouble. Still, I will meet you in the evening, not during day-time.I will tell you everything as it goes. You should act accordingly. There are more people now siding with Sarup, so if he agrees, no one can stop him. I will bring him to you."

"Good," Mukund answered.

Mukund took out ten thousand rupees from his bag and handed it to Buchai. Buchai counted the notes and said, "What will this do? I know the village tricks. The work itself is crooked."

"Keep this for now. As things move forward, tell me what else you need. I will provide it," Mukund said.

"All right," Buchai replied, and with folded hands he took his leave.

Mukund watched him go and felt something rise in his chest. Even though Shrikant too was an engineer, he thought, the money I have saved might still outstrip whatever Shrikant has not noticed. A contest for claim could be arranged. The thought made him quietly pleased.

Buchai walked back from Mukund's place with a swagger in his step. His thoughts churned as he went. "Another one," he muttered. "Never seen such old foxes before, greedy even at this age. A lifetime spent hoarding money, and still no peace of mind. Good. This time both will learn their lesson. In a village where people have lived for generations with honesty and affection, keeping their fathers' homes, sharing joys and sorrows together, if such sly outsiders start taking root, how long willpeace last? They'll ruin it bit by bit, instigating quarrels among all."

The next morning, around seven, Buchai went to see Sarup. The two had been friends since childhood; even after both had families, their easy banter continued. When he didn't see Sarup in the courtyard, he called out, "Friend! Hey friend, where are you?"

From the southern veranda came Sarup's voice. He was sitting there, opening the cork of a bottle of country liquor. "Here, friend! Come inside, come!"

As Buchai reached the doorway, he spotted Sarup's wife and teased, "Friend, your wife's face looks long today. You're still sulking from last night's quarrel? I always make peace before I sleep, but you're still dragging it out!"

Sarup laughed and said, "You old fool! You never change. Always have a joke on your tongue." Then turning to his wife he said, "Bring another glass."

She brought one and placed it before him. The two friends drank together. When the bottle grew light, Sarup tilted it to check and refilled both glasses. Between sips, Buchai said with a grin, "Pour

one for your wife too."

Sarup's wife, Kala, replied sharply, "I don't drink a dirty drink."

Buchai chuckled, "Just taste it once and see how the warmth rises."

Kala smiled in spite of herself. Changing the subject, Sarup asked, "So, friend, what brings you here so early in the morning?"

Buchai took a bundle of five thousand rupees from his pocket and set it before Sarup.

"Here, this is your share. Two contestants have wandered into the village. We will teach both of them a lesson. I will favour one, you favour the other. Like two boys grabbing the tail of a pair of rats and making them fight, let us incite these two men fight each other."

Kala laughed at the sight of the money. Seeing her laugh, Buchai said, "Listen, friend, fortune has two faces. One is a wife, the other is money. Your lot is strong because both belong to you."

Kala turned her face away. Seeing her do that, Buchai coaxed, "Do not be shy, friend. Take some of this money and go buy eggs from the shop. Have fried flattened rice and egg kofta ready."

Kala left with fifty rupees and went to buy the eggs. Once she was gone, Buchai leaned toward Sarup and whispered, "Friend, two thieving, greedy men have come to the village. Both are thieves and both are greedy. Each claims the family homestead. Each has two and a half kathas in the records. They belong to the same lineage. Since there is only one ancestral branch, neither has another branch to oppose him. Both want three kathas for themselves. Each wants to show up the other. The villagers are like grass in their eyes. We will not let them do so. We will get money from them and yet get things arranged properly."

Sarup sat silent for a moment and then said, "Oh friend, what kind of fine people are we? We spend the day talking nonsense and drinking toddy and liquor, and now you call us fine?"

Buchai spat a laugh.

"Listen, old man, you are clouded by intoxication, so you cannot see clearly. You know there are no people of many castes in

the village, but when someone dies do they not go to the cremation ground? Why should the poorest of the poor be left with nothing, or be burned without a shroud? If you do not have money in your hand, can you not borrow a little from a few people and make it whole? Have you not seen, in the third year, how a cow stuck in the flood was dragged out and saved by us? When Motia's daughter was married, who arranged the fine match for her? When khanganna Dom's hut was on fire, did you not see who was first to run with the earthen water pot to put it out? When other saw me run, then everyone else came after. For that my mother scolded me saying that I along with the earthen pot became unholy with the touch. Is that service not true religion or duty?"

Sarup's neck bobbed. "Yes, that is true," he said.

Buchai went on, "I will go with Shrikant's side and you stand with Mukund. In elections we spend on publicity, office work, tea and betel, loudspeakers and transport, keep ten workers at the booth, pay agents, receive the leaders and host them, all those expenses come from the leaders. In the same way, from now until the measurement is done, every expense must be collected from both men. It is proper to take it, and taking it is not a sin."

Sarup asked, "How will we collect the money? Have you planned that?"

Buchai grinned. "Why worry? We'll make more than in an election. There'll be bribes for the surveyor, bribes for the panchayat, expenses for tea, snacks, ganja, bhang, toddy, liquor, and even for the musclemen. I can't list it all. As the work goes on, the money will keep flowing. What's come today is only a good omen. When evening falls thick and dark, we'll meet. I'll arrange your face-to-face meeting. There are two tea stalls at the square. You sit at one, I'll sit at the other. You talk with Mukund and tell him he deserves three kathas. I'll do the same on my side. Just remember, when Shrikant arrives, treat him to tea, betel, and smoke, and echo whatever he says. When Mukund comes, I'll do the same. They'll both think the whole village is with them. For now, we'll spend on tea and toddy, but on the day of measurement we'll feed everyone puri-jalebi in the morning and goat curry with rice at lunch."

Sarup said, “That’s a fine plan.”

Buchai continued, “I’ve already fixed Khushilal, the surveyor, for Shrikant’s side. You secure Kisundev for Mukund. Each will have his own ameen, but we’ll also need one neutral middleman. For that, we’ll pull in Ramchandra. And as for the panchayat, the villagers are split, but we’ll need one steady elder on the bench, let’s bring Guru Kaka. Once Ramchandra is the neutral ameen and Guru Kaka the head panch, not a grain of soil will move from one side to the other without our say.”

The next day Buchai and Sarup went to see Guru Kaka, who was sitting on his veranda. They bowed and sat before him. Seeing them together, Guru Kaka smiled and said, “What’s this, Buchai? The two of you together, planning some mischief at the market again?”

Buchai replied, “We came to see you, Kaka. Shrikant and Mukund are getting their ancestral land measured, and we’re helping out.”

Guru Kaka shook his head, “Why measure it at all? It’s a fine yard where the children play.”

Sarup answered, “They’re retiring soon, Kaka. Their service is nearly done, and they plan to settle in the village. They want to measure now and start building their houses.”

Guru Kaka said, “I hear both those men already have houses in the city. Why would they build here too? They won’t stay long in the village. All their lives they’ve lived in fine hotels, travelled on smooth roads in expensive cars, and seen the costliest pleasures. None of that exists here. Why would they come back just to walk in mud and feed the mosquitoes?”

Buchai jumped in quickly, eager to explain. “You don’t understand, Kaka. Both men are wounded, badly. They’ve been through real trouble, that’s why they’re turning toward the village again.”

Guru Kaka looked startled. “What kind of trouble?”

Buchai leaned closer, lowering his voice, “It happened three years ago. Shrikant Kaka’s wife went shopping with their driver. While they were returning from the market, another car followed

them. When they reached a narrow stretch of road, the second car overtook them and blocked their way. Four men got out, dragged Kaki from her car, and told the driver to keep driving down a side lane. The poor man obeyed. A little ahead they stopped, pulled her out, and told the driver, 'Go tell your master to bring five lakh rupees if he wants his wife back. He has two hours.'

The driver left, terrified. Meanwhile, the men stuffed her mouth with cloth so tight that four of her teeth broke. Her lips were torn, and she began to cry. They handed her a phone and told her to call her husband. She wept and said, 'Bring the money fast, or I won't survive.'

By then the driver had reached Shrikant. He had only two lakh rupees in hand, the recent month's savings, the rest was in the bank. He rushed with that money, fell at their feet, and pleaded until they released her."

At this, Guru Kaka burst into laughter. "And what about Mukund? Why is he coming back?"

Smiling slyly, Buchai said, "His story is even stranger. One day a contractor threw a grand party. All the big officers and contractors were there. Mukund went too, leaving his old car at home and taking the new one gifted to his son in his marriage. When he came back from the party, his daughter-in-law asked, 'How did you feel riding in my car, Father?' That remark pierced him deep. From that day, his affection for his son and daughter-in-law broke. That's why he wants to live in the village now."

Hearing this, Guru Kaka fell silent, lost in thought. After a moment he said, "The village is a world of its own, pure Mithila, pure India. It's better than heaven. But every village has its own character and dignity, built by the labour and sacrifice of its hardworking people. That character, that honour, must be preserved. It is now the duty of the younger generation. Whatever these men achieved in their government jobs has nothing to do with the village. They did it for themselves. As members of this community, they still have responsibilities they never fulfilled.

Yet, if they now wish to return and plant flowers in the garden of this village, that would be good, if they truly mean it. But from

what I see, the signs don't show it. To live in a community, one must align one's character with the character of that community. Otherwise it's useless. A donkey that wanders into heaven does not become divine just because it wears bells and garlands."

Both Buchai and Sarup leaned forward and said together, "Kaka, we don't understand these things the way you do. Tell us more about the village."

Guru Kaka smiled faintly, "This isn't the time for a long talk, but since you're eager to know, I'll tell you two things. First, the educated and the uneducated alike must often leave the village to fill their stomachs. That's fine. But they shouldn't forget completely the village, their roots, their people, their soil. Look at today: from America or England people can reach home in three days. So anyone can visit at least once a year. But instead, people abandon their villages and build homes elsewhere. That's the misfortune of villages. When that happens, the knowledge and vitality of villages get exported. The sleeping village keeps sleeping. Its behaviour, its art, and its culture slowly break apart. And then, when someone returns after retirement, hoping to live peacefully, he finds no peace, only conflict and quarrel at every step."

Guru Kaka continued, "Listen to the second thing. In our own village lived a man named Vaidikji. His real name was Gangadhar, but everyone called him Vaidikji because of his mastery of the Vedas. His grandson, Shubhkant, still lives here. Vaidikji was a scholar of extraordinary depth, known across states. Whenever scholars held debates, none could stand against him. He received countless medals and letters of honour. Even today, people from nearby regions refer to our village as Vaidikji's village.

It is because of men like him that our village's water still flows pure. In those days, even our village suffered from untouchability in drinking water. But one day, he gathered everyone and explained, 'In this world, every human being is a human being, no one is high or low. There should be no untouchability among men.' The crowd clapped in agreement. From that day onward, untouchability vanished from our wells and ponds.

Then there was Jogindar, disciple of the great Bhikhari Das, the

legendary folk artist. Jogindar too had a rare gift. On stage he was like fire, fierce and rhythmic, singing with unearthly power. In every performance he took the lead. I have yet to see such brilliance again. Because of him, Bhikhari Das's troupe performed here many times. Whenever their group set out east toward Assam, Bengal, or Nepal, they stopped in our village. The villagers would provide food and light for their stay. When they returned months later, they would halt here again.

And then there was Mahavir, poor fellow. He went to Calcutta for work but couldn't find a job, so he pulled a rickshaw. Yet, even while pedalling, he made up songs and verses. At first he was illiterate, but he began learning the alphabet, slowly he learned to read and write. He would sing his own songs while driving his rickshaw. One day, a poet happened to ride with him. Listening to his verses, the poet invited him to a gathering. There Mahavir recited three poems and sang two songs. From that day on, he was called to many poetry meetings. The Government of Bengal awarded him ten thousand rupees and a certificate of honour.

And what about Khaliqa, the wrestler, whom the whole region called Khaliqa Khalifa? He defeated champions from far and wide. Because of him, no man in the area dared look at another's wife or daughter with bad intent. Once, when a zamindar's guard insulted a woman, Khalifa struck him down in front of the whole crowd. That very day, the zamindar gave him two bighas of land in gratitude.

This village was built by such learned men, such artists, such protectors of honour. How can we, while still alive, turn our backs on what they made? If we do, what will the next generation inherit? Whose names will they remember? If these two engineers truly wish to live here as human beings among us, good. But if not, the village will go on, society does not depend on a few who have forgotten it."

The day of partition arrived. The division itself was simple, five kathas divided into two equal halves. After measuring, Ramchandra, the surveyor announced calmly, "Anyone who doubts may check for himself, by rod, by tape, by stick, or even by footstep." ❑

Brotherhood

☰

Having appeared for his matriculation exam, Dinanath began visiting friends and teachers, seeking advice on how to continue his studies. Born in an uneducated family, he knew little about how college life worked. Though he was only a third-division student in school, he had always been one of the brightest in his class. He had written every paper well in the examination, so the thought of failing never even crossed his mind.

His parents, though simple and illiterate, had poured their hearts into his education. Their financial condition was poor, yet the desire to see their son educated filled both Ramkhelawan and his wife Sumitra to the brim. When Dinanath began preparing to leave for Darbhanga, where the exam center was located, his mother sold the small nose ring she wore, worth barely six paise. For her, no hardship was too great if it meant her child could study. As long as a parent holds the wish to educate, and the child works even a little toward it, he will somehow make it happen despite every obstacle. Dinanath was one such child.

The next morning, Dinanath had to catch the 11 o'clock train for his exam. So, that evening, Ramkhelawan told his wife, "Tomorrow, before he leaves, bring half a seer of milk and set curd for him. A good curd brings good luck for the journey."

Sumitra took his words to heart. As she prepared to curdle the milk, she made a silent vow to Lord Brahma: "If you help my son pass his exam, I'll offer a meal to unmarried girls in your name."

Then, hurrying about, she mixed the fine clay with water, kneaded it well, and made a small earthen bowl. She lined it with a strip of clean old cloth, poured a little mustard oil into a lamp, and

placed it before the household shrine. As dusk fell, she offered her evening worship and started on her way to the Brahma temple, whispering all along the path, “O Brahma Baba, please help my son pass. I have faith only in you.”

Dinanath was the brightest student in the school, yet his name always appeared third on the merit list. The reason was simple: the high school functioned under the authority of its secretary, who was the true master of everything there. Both honour and fees revolved around his will. The student ranked first was always a relative or favourite of the secretary. If the secretary’s own kin were not present in a batch, then the headmaster’s relative took the top position. But in Dinanath’s batch, both the secretary and the headmaster had their kin appearing for the exam. The secretary’s kin took first place, the headmaster’s kin second, and Dinanath, despite his merit, was placed third.

The one who ranked first was granted full exemption from fees, while the second and third got half. Other teachers deeply resented this injustice, but they could do nothing. Their position in the school was hardly better than household servants. They worked seven teaching hours a day for barely a hundred and fifty rupees a month, yet they remained honest in their duty.

The school also had an “assessment” system, carrying twenty marks for each subject. Only Social Studies had a separate evaluation process. These assessment marks were added to the final exam scores to determine the overall result. But the control of these marks rested entirely in the hands of the secretary and the headmaster. The final results would be declared about three months after the examination.

A month had already passed since the exams ended, and two months still remained before the results. It was the end of the Magh month, Saraswati Puja had taken place five days earlier. A piercing cold wave swept across Mithila, turning it into something like Siberia. Day and night were indistinguishable; both wrapped in the same dull gray. Dewdrops fell like fine rain, and the sun had not been seen for two months. People could no longer tell when the day began or the night ended, for darkness seemed unbroken. Everyone’s only concern was to save themselves from the biting cold.

Agricultural work had come to a complete standstill. The winter crops–wheat and barley–had withered in the frost, refusing to grow. Even after wrapping themselves in layers, both people and cattle trembled violently. Calves of cows and buffaloes froze to death. Goats had almost disappeared. Trees looked scorched and lifeless. Birds, squirrels, snakes, and small creatures lay dead here and there, their smell spreading through the air.

Two days before the full moon of Magh, Ramkhelawan was struck by paralysis. Half his body went numb. He did not feel pinching in his body even with a slight cut. His face looked like the beak of a bird. He was not that old, not yet forty.

It was the coldest and the darkest night although it was the lighted fortnight.

Seeing his father in that state made Dinanath afraid. His mother too was shaken. Still, steadying himself, Dinanath left for bringing the local doctor. After a short distance his leg began to stiffen so badly that he could hardly move. He thought: I might die before my father does, and never reach home again. Panic and prayer grappled inside him. Tears streamed from both his eyes. He wondered what to do next. Then, rubbing his thigh with his hand, he felt a little movement. He kept at it. The thigh loosened.He left for the doctor.

When he reached the clinic and saw the crowd, Dinanath grew more anxious. It seemed every sick person in the world had gathered there. Only one doctor and two compounders were on duty. How could they attend to everyone? The illnesses were mostly common, so the doctor did not need to spend long on each case. He treated people briskly. Still, the clinic was like a fair of the ill. For a moment Dinanath stood watching, then, almost begging, he went up to the doctor and said, “Doctor, please come with me. My father has fallen very ill. He cannot even move.”

The doctor answered, “Child, look around. How can I leave so many patients here? It would not be right to abandon those who are already here.”

Dinanath replied, “If you do not go to treat him now, he will die.”

“Do not worry. I will give you two tablets at once. Give them

to him to swallow and bring him back here later."

The thought of his father's death began to circle in Dinanath's mind. Holding back tears, he took the two tablets from the doctor and left. Yet when he turned toward home, his legs refused to move. The cold pierced through his bones, his heart was heavy with despair, and the dark night wind bit like knives. Still, tightening his will, he began walking. The path was muddy and broken in many places. He slipped and fell more than once, but each time he stood up again and kept going.

When he reached home, he gave the two tablets to his father. Nearby, his mother was crouched by the hearth, rubbing her aching limbs beside the fading embers. There was no proper bed in the house. Who could he call for help at that hour of night? Then he remembered his cousin brother. Without wasting a moment, he went to him and said, "Brother, please give me your cot and come with me. In a time like this, whom else can we call? Who would come?"

The moment he heard Dinanath's voice, the cousin jumped up, pulled the cot out, and followed him. They laid a thin layer of straw over the frame and spread an old quilt on top. Tying the legs of the cot firmly with rope, they lifted Ramkhelawan onto it. Fixing two bamboo poles through the sides, they hoisted it on their shoulders and set out for the doctor's house. Behind them walked Sumitra.

For a while, Dinanath felt nothing but numbness. Then his shoulders began to burn. The skin beneath the bamboo peeled away, and the poles cut deep into the flesh. He shifted sides again and again, somehow enduring the pain until they reached the doctor.

The doctor examined Ramkhelawan at once. The illness seemed clear. He quickly injected five doses of medicine. Then turning to Dinanath, he said, "Keep him lying on the cot. Don't worry. It isn't a severe paralysis. It'll take some time, but he'll recover."

Ramkhelawan soon fell asleep. Beneath the cot, the three of them sat quietly. Sumitra's thoughts wandered. She felt the weight of time pressing on her. The world has changed, she thought, sons and daughters-in-law hardly look after their own. As long as a husband lives, a woman has some worth. Once he's gone, her world turns dark.

She remembered the saying, A husband's home is a woman's world; the son's home belongs to the daughter-in-law. What could she do? Her fate was written. O Mother Goddess, she prayed silently, make him well again. And if not, then take me first.

The next morning, the doctor examined Ramkhelawan and said, "Take him home. He will recover better with care at home. The illness will not worsen now, but the treatment will take time. My compounder will visit daily to give the injections and check his condition. If you notice anything troubling, come and inform me at once."

Saying this, the doctor gave two more injections and wrote out a prescription: one injection and three kinds of tablets to be taken every day. While the doctor and others were still talking, Ramkhelawan turned to his wife and said softly, "I feel like eating something."

At the sound of that, a smile spread across Dinanath's face. He hurried to a shop nearby, brought milk and biscuits, and fed his father with care. Once his father had eaten, Dinanath and his cousin lifted the cot again and started for home. When they reached, people from the neighbourhood and the entire village began arriving to see him. The cold wave continued, yet the stream of visitors did not stop. For two hours, people kept coming, offering sympathy and questions.

At last Dinanath said to his mother, "Ma, I'm starving. Please cook something first. The hunger is burning inside me."

Hearing this, Sumitra went to prepare food. She too was hungry but said nothing; who listens to a mother's hunger in hard times?

Dinanath's sister-in-law overheard the words. The poor woman thought, everyone must be hungry. It's already past noon. By the time the meal is ready, it will be evening, and they're all faint with hunger. She looked around and decided quickly, there's some flattened rice in the house. I'll give that for now; at least it will ease their hunger for the moment.

And so she did.

Mother and son were eating soaked chura when Dinanath's maternal uncle arrived. The moment Sumitra saw her brother, tears

welled up in her eyes. Without even washing his feet, he hurried to his brother-in-law's side. Seeing Ramkhelawan's condition, tears began to stream from Maksudan's eyes as well. But wiping them away, he reminded himself, I am the elder, and a man besides. If I cry, what strength will my sister and her son find?

Gathering his composure, Maksudan said gently, "Sister, this is how life goes. Illness and pain are a part of it. When the body heats, fever follows. We'll do all we can, but…" He paused, then added, "Don't worry about money. The medicine will not stop for lack of it. I heard the news only this morning and came running. My cow has just calved. Tomorrow I'll sell her and bring whatever money is needed. For now, I'll go and return tomorrow."

Four days later, Ramkhelawan's face straightened. He was even able to stand, though one leg still refused to move properly, and each step wavered with a limp. The compounder came every morning, gave the injection, and checked on him before leaving.

Two months passed, and Dinanath's examination results were announced. He had passed in First Division, with six hundred and three marks. The headmaster's relative too got First Division, but with only five hundred and forty-five marks. The secretary's kin, despite being placed second, received just Second Division, though his total was good, five hundred and thirty-four. With all this, Dinanath gave up his dream of further study. There was no one else in the family to take on responsibilities. His father was still ill, the household expenses were heavy, and his younger brother Kusumlal was in Class Eight. Yet, Dinanath did not grieve for his broken ambition. Instead, he felt a quiet joy in serving his parents and keeping the family together.

He thought, what is the worth of a son who cannot care for his father and mother?

The desire for his own education faded, and he turned that hope instead toward his younger brother, Kusumlal.

Maksudan began staying longer at his sister's house. He took charge of tending the cow and managing the fields. He brought water and food from his own home and bore the household burden as if it

were his own. Seeing this, Ramkhelawan said to him one day, "Brother, I have become useless now. I will live only as long as my fate allows. Death can come at any moment, so while I am still breathing, get Dinanath married. It is a parent's duty to see their children married before they die. I want to witness it once with my own eyes."

Hearing his brother-in-law's words, Maksudan fell silent. He thought to himself, Times have turned so hard. It is difficult now to find good people for a home. Everything runs on money. Human worth has vanished. How will I find a good girl in such a world? Still, one way remains, to look for a virtuous girl, not one measured by wealth. That will bring true peace to the house. Turning to Ramkhelawan, he said, "Brother, people run after money. If you entrust this to me, I will not weigh the match in silver and gold. I will bring a good girl of good family and nature. What do you think?"

His sister, listening nearby, spoke at once, "Brother, money is a trifle thing. A person is made through patience and virtue. I want a good daughter-in-law, not a rich one."

Maksudan felt reassured. "Sister," he said, "your daughter-in-law will be mine as well. Who would be so unfortunate as not to wish his own home to prosper?"

Having given up the hope of higher studies, Dinanath now began preparing to stand on his own feet. He resolved that the same determination with which he once worked for his studies, he would now apply to rebuilding his family.

Maksudan started searching for a bride. Yet a thought troubled him: We are from the groom's side. How can I, as the uncle, go to the girl's home first? After some reflection, he decided, a son or daughter's marriage is a sacred duty of the family. Small formalities should not stand in the way. Besides, I am only the maternal uncle, not the father. When my brother-in-law has placed this trust upon me, refusing it would be wrong.

In the neighbouring village of his own, Maksudan found a possible match. The family was simple, but the girl, Kajul, was diligent and graceful. Her mother, had always raised her to work with

her hands. She helped in the fields and at home, drew aripan designs, painted the doorway plants and the flowering kadamba trees. During festivals, she sang folk songs and managed every ritual with devotion.

Maksudan set out for Bheja, the village of the bride pretending to be a purchaser of oxen .After stopping at a few homes on the way, he reached the girl's courtyard. The head of the household was not there, but a young girl came toward the yard carrying a bucket of water. Seeing her, Maksudan asked gently, "Child, where is your father?"

Placing the bucket down, the girl replied, "He's in the garden weeding chilly plants. Please sit on the cot. I'll call him."

Leaving the bucket in the yard, Sushila ran to call her father from the backyard. They were neighbours and had seen each other before, but not close enough to speak. The man of the house came and greeted him, asking, "Whom do you have business with?"

Smiling, Maksudan said, "Here we're only two persons. So I'll speak my mind. I'm from Birpur. My nephew is of marriageable age. Yesterday I learned you have a daughter ready for marriage. I've come to propose kinship between our families."

Hearing the word "kinship," the man fell silent for a while, then said, "We are householders, but not wealthy ones. You know how small farmers here live. I fear I can't manage my daughter's wedding this season."

Seeing his worried face, Maksudan replied, "Remove the ghost of dowry from your mind. We will arrange the marriage within your means. You'll not have to stretch beyond what you can afford."

At this, the man's face brightened. He called toward the door, "Daughter, will you bring some sweet drink?"

Carrying a large pot of sherbet and a glass, Sushila came to the doorway and placed them carefully on the bench. Her father said, "Child, he isn't a stranger. He's our neighbour from Birpur. Offer him the sherbet."

Both men drank the sherbet. After finishing, the host said, "Daughter, bring some tea as well."

Sushila went inside to make tea, while the two men continued

their conversation at the doorway. Maksudan said, "Your daughter and my nephew are alike in every way. The Creator has made them for each other. See the boy yourself tomorrow. The match is good, so do not delay in such an auspicious matter."

But the father was not as enthusiastic as Maksudan expected. His heart kept circling around the thought: After all, it's my daughter's marriage; mere talk will not do. Meanwhile, from behind the curtain of the inner courtyard, the girl's mother was half-hidden, listening to the conversation and watching them.A quiet excitement stirred in her. She thought, it would be foolish to let such a match slip away. Who among the poor gets through a wedding or a funeral without debt? From birth to death, we live in debt anyway. So why worry so much? Even if I must borrow, I will see my daughter married into a good home. The boy has passed matriculation in first division. Such an educated groom is rare. It is said that if the learned man ploughs, even the foolish will get a straight furrow. Today, even an illiterate groom costs fifty thousand rupees in dowry. This one seems sent by fate itself. Her heart longed to rush to the doorway and say, If you wish to marry her today itself, we are ready. But the modesty of a woman held her back, and she remained half-hidden, trembling with hope. Meanwhile, the father's hesitation began to fade. He turned to Maksudan and said, "See, I am alone in this matter, but the mistress of the house must be consulted. I handle the work outside the house, but she governs within. If she has set aside anything for the girl's marriage, I will agree at once."

Then he rose and went into the courtyard. The moment he entered, his wife whispered sharply, "You sit there entertaining the matchmaker, while I know how these things end. When the boy's uncle himself has come to our door with a proposal you should not dilly-dally. You will have to run painfully from pillar to post in search of a groom. Go tell him our situation is not very good right now, but if he is ready, we are too. Fix the day for seeing the groom tomorrow itself."

Encouraged by his wife's words, Bhola returned to the guest and said, "My wife perfectly consents to the proposal but I must tell you that my financial condition right now is not very good."

Maksudan replied, "See the boy tomorrow. If you like him, we

will proceed as you wish. What we seek is good people, not wealth or dowry."

Within eight days, the wedding took place. Bhola's sister and sister-in-law both helped earnestly in the preparations. From his own side, Bhola could offer only one small gold earring, worth nine and a half rupees. Fifteen days after the wedding, Dinanath sat in the eastern veranda, speaking softly to his mother so that his father would not hear. "Ma, you see the state of our house. How long can things go on like this? Every year we sell a bit of land, and at this rate, everything will vanish in a few years. There's no other income. The cost of Kusumlal's schooling, Father's medicine, and household needs, all must come from one and a half bighas of land. We have no irrigation, no proper farming tools. Until now Father managed somehow, but now even that's not possible. If I go for a job, there will be no one to care for him. So there's only one way, to stay home and start some work that can bring income."

Hearing her son, Sumitra fell silent. She knew he was right. A house where expenses outweigh earnings cannot survive long. The thought brought tears to her eyes. Wiping them with her sari, she said, "Son, I am a woman, bound to this house and courtyard. But you are a man. When God has taken away one path, He must have opened another. You will have to find it."

Mother and son sat with their heads bowed, neither meeting the other's eyes. It was as if both were parched wanderers in a desert, too weary to speak. At the doorway, Sushila stood quietly, watching them. No one spoke aloud, fearing that if the ailing father or husband overheard, the sorrow would only deepen.

Stepping gently inside, Sushila said, "Ma, worry alone will not drive away suffering. We must find a way to fight it. The younger one is still a child, and Father is sick, but the three of us are strong and able to work. Hard work can change everything."

Hearing her, Sumitra sighed. "Daughter, your words are good," she said, "but fine words alone do not fill an empty pot."

Sushila replied, "There's a woman I know who runs a small rice mill. Her family was once poorer than ours, with four daughters to marry off. But from the day she began husking paddy, her life

turned around. She married off all four daughters, educated her son, built a brick house, and even bought five bighas of land. No one in the village can match her now."

Her words lit a spark in Dinanath's mind. He leapt up, excitement spreading across his face, and ran to the courtyard. Taking out paper and pen, he began to calculate.

From one and a half kilo of paddy comes about one kilo of rice. A full sack of paddy weighs eighty kilos, while a sack of rice is sixty. Paddy sells for four hundred rupees per sack, so a quintal brings about five hundred. A quintal of paddy gives roughly sixty-five kilos of rice, leaving a few kilos for their own food. At ten to eleven rupees a kilo, the rice from one quintal brings nearly seven hundred rupees. With a five-hundred-rupee input, that's a profit of about two hundred. Add thirty kilos of husk and bran worth sixty rupees more.

The only real expenses would be wages, husking, and transport. Everything else would be the fruit of labour. Dinanath calculated again and smiled. "If I can process just one sack of paddy a day," he said aloud, "I can earn nearly five thousand rupees a month."

As Dinanath kept adding and rechecking his figures, a doubt crept into his mind, perhaps there was some mistake in the calculation. Leaving the paper and pen aside, he began pacing the courtyard, mentally doing the sums again. Sometimes the numbers seemed to make sense, sometimes not. He went to the courtyard, drank some water, wiped his forehead, and returned to his seat. Once more, he checked the math. The result came out exactly the same. Confidence slowly took hold of his heart, and with it, a sense of excitement about the work ahead.

He went to his mother and asked, "Ma, how long does it take to boil one sack of paddy?"

She replied, "One sack makes about ten tins. On two stoves, it takes five rounds, but on four stoves, only two and a half. You can boil it all within an hour."

Encouraged by her words, Dinanath made up his mind. He would start this very trade. He got five gold pieces from his wife's gold necklace, sold them, and bought paddy to begin his small

husking business. Slowly, prosperity began to return to the household.

Kusumlal, the younger brother, passed his B.A. and got a clerk's job at the Madhubani court. Later, he married the daughter of a senior officer there. The couple set up their home in Madhubani itself, living a disciplined and simple life for the first three or four years, managing only on his salary. But gradually, he learned the tricks of earning money. With that came new habits, good food, new clothes, the taste for city comfort. His educated wife too grew fond of spending. The city air had changed them. They began watching films, drinking occasionally, and spending freely.

One day, his wife said, "What's the use of keeping land back in the village? It gives us nothing. Sell it and buy a plot here in Madhubani. We can build our own house. Paying rent every month is just throwing money away."

Her words appealed to Kusumlal. The next Sunday, on his day off, he came to the village and said to Dinanath, "Brother, I want to sell my share of the land. I've already found two kathas of land in Madhubani. I'll build my house there. The rent we pay here eats up my whole salary, and then I can't even send anything to help you."

Hearing this, Dinanath said quietly, "Brother, Father and Mother are still alive. How can I decide such a matter? Ask them yourself."

Hearing Dinanath's words, Kusumlal went to his father. The ailing Ramkhelawan, irritated, said, "There's one and a half bighas of land. Ten kathas belong to me and your mother, ten to Dinanath, and ten to you. Sell your share if you wish."

Land brokers were always nearby in the village. Kusumlal contacted one of them. The broker fixed the price at five thousand per katha. Kusumlal agreed but didn't finalize the deal immediately. Dinnanath too began to think over it. That evening, when Kusumlal was preparing to leave for Madhubani, Dinanath said to him, "Brother, whatever price others offer, I shall pay the same. This is our ancestral land. How can we allow outsiders to set foot in our courtyard?" Kusumlal accepted Dinanath'soffer and sold his share for fifty thousand rupees. With that money he built a house in

Madhubani. Over time his ties with his village weakened. He visited more often his in-laws than his own people. A few members of his wife's family would visit regularly and the hospitality was always generous. Twenty years passed. Dinanath's son cleared the medical entrance examination and his daughter was studying in the science stream at the intermediate level. Both children were brilliant students. The family's hopes grew stronger that the daughter too would get into medical college. Watching his children's progress and caring for his ageing parents, Dinanath felt deep happiness and contenment. The condition of the family had completely changed.

Yet Dinnanath never stopped his rice-husking business; in fact he expanded it. He even thought of setting up a small dhan-kutiya mill, though he hesitated because of official complications. He bought a tractor and trolley to use for farming and for additional transport income.

Kusumlal, meanwhile, had two sons. Both studied in private schools, the elder in Class Eight and the younger in Class Six. Although living in Madhubani he kept them in a hostel and they also took tuition in every subject, which made heavy expenses.

In course of time drinking Kusumlal's drinking habits worsened. His liver began to fail. For a while he took treatment in Madhubani but his condition didn't improve. He was then admitted to a hospital in Darbhanga where he remained for four months. When that failed too he went to Patna but even there recovery didn't come. His health kept declining. Finally, he was taken to AIIMS in Delhi, yet no cure could be found. His body grew so weak that he could no longer sit or stand by himself. Exhausted and hopeless, he returned to his rented house in Madhubani, but through all those months of illness he never once informed Dinanath. He continued living as before, surrounded by friends and the same social circle. Lying on the cot, Kusumlal's body had become frail and hollow. Flies buzzed around him constantly, settling on his skin. No matter how many sheets his wife spread over him, the flies crept in, biting and stinging. He groaned day and night in pain. His wife's heart always burned with helpless anger; she scolded and muttered under her breath. Neither of the two sons was willing to stay near him. The elder son saod, “Papa smells bad.” When he did come near, he pinched his nose shut. The

younger one behaved the same way. He often said bitterly, “Papa will turn into a ghost now. If we stay too close, he'll catch us too.”

One day a staff member from Kusumlal's family telephoned Dinnanath. Your brother is counting his last breaths,” he said. “Come quickly, if you wisht to see him one last time.”

The news stunned Dinanath. It was as if the whole world went blank before his eyes. He felt the silence of a grave yard closing arround him. His heart whispered: No one belongs to anyone. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Wiping them away, he thought: Could the caller have been mistaken? But who would lie about such a thing? Who would waste money to send false news? If Kusumlal has reached this state, even without a word to me, still I have my duty. A man lives by his duty. It's too late to go today. I'll leave for Madhubani at dawn.

Turning to his mother, he said, “Ma, a man from Madhubani called. He said that Kusumlal was very ill. I should go and see him.” At his words his mother flared like fire. “Is kusum my son,” she cried, “that I should go and see his face? He died for me the day he abandoned us. If there is justice in this world, I too will have a place in it. If the scriptures speak of faithful wives, they will speak of me. For twenty years I have kept your father alive with these two hands, holding fast to the dignity of my bangles and vermilion.”

Hearing her, Dinanath thought quietly: Even if Kusumlal never sent me money, what have I lost? My parents are still alive, my wife and children are happy. We share the same blood, the same lineage. I should go.

At dawn the next day, Dinnanath took the first train to Madhubani and reached his brother's rented house. In the front room Kusumlal lay covered to his chin with a blanket. As Dinanath uncovered his face, Kusumlal looked up weakly and whispered, “Brother...” And with that one word"Brother" Kusumlal closed his eyes for ever. Dinanath fell beside him, crying out, "Kusum! Brother! Oh brother! My brother!" ❑

Sister

☰

"Mother won't survive much longer now. After all, she's already about ninety. For the last fifteen or twenty years she has hardly ever fallen ill, never even a touch of fever. But now, at this age, her body is worn out, and ailments seem to be piling up one after another. It's as if her strength is drying up like parched soil," - Radheshyam said to his wife, his voice low and heavy.

Hearing him, Ragini stayed silent for a moment and then replied softly, "No one can give life to another. As long as she lives, we will do whatever we can for her, won't we?"

"Yes, that's all we can do," he said, "but this is the hardest test of life. What we did before doesn't matter as much as what we do now. If she asks for water or calls out for something, and there's even a slight delay, people will start talking that the poor old mother kept crying for water, and her son and daughter-in-law never cared to look at her. How can we shut anyone's mouth? You know how people in the village love to twist the truth, stirring up quarrels and spreading slander. So one of us must stay with her all the time. If we don't, we will bear the stain of neglect at her final hour."

Ragini nodded. "You are right. But with the children gone, it is just the two of us now. We will manage, taking turns. Leave the outside work for now; there is enough inside to keep us busy. Let's inform the sisters too."

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "If the three sisters come, it will ease the load. There will be plenty to do from the courtyard to the front gate. Once relatives and friends hear, they will come to ask after her, and we will have to greet them properly."

Ragini moved her head in agreement. "Yes, that's how it will be."

"We are still able-bodied, and there's much to be done," he added. "So I will send word to the three sisters and to uncle. No need to inform the rest of the relatives just yet."

He dialled his uncle's number on the phone.

"Hello, Uncle. It's Radheshyam."

"Yes, Radheshyam. How are things?"

"Mother has fallen seriously ill."

"I'm caught up with some urgent work right now. I'll be there by evening."

He hung up and called his eldest sister, Gauri.

"Hello, Sister. Mother is very sick."

"I'm at school, and my husband's in college. We're both applying for leave right now. We'll reach by evening."

After ending the call, he dialled his younger sister.

"Sunita, this is Radheshyam."

"Brother, is Mother doing all right?"

"There's no 'all right' or 'unwell' anymore. She's been bedridden for three days now, so it's hard to say anything."

"I'm applying for leave right away and coming."

"Good."

Then he called his middle sister, Rita.

"Hello, Rita. It's Radheshyam. Mother is in serious condition."

"Brother, I'm already so tied up that I can't even get a day off. The children's competition exams start tomorrow."

Without switching off the phone, Radheshyam placed it down and looked toward the sky. His lips moved slowly as he muttered, "The children's exams… and Mother lying on her deathbed. Which comes first? On one side, the children who haven't even stepped into life yet, and on the other, an aged mother struggling to breathe. But everyone has his own life, his own way of living. We're four siblings, so we rely on one another. But what about those who are alone? Who will help them cross the river of life and death?"

He was lost in thought when suddenly a flicker of energy rose

within him. His gaze shifted backward and forward as memories stirred. Among all the children, Mother had loved him the most, and he had served her more than anyone else. The strange part, though, was that the very ones who received the most love were always the first to forget her.

Slowly, one by one, the uncle and all three sisters with their husbands arrived.

As soon as he entered, Dr. Sudhir, the youngest brother-in-law, examined his mother-in-law and said to Radheshyam, "Brother, Mother will not survive, but her death may take another ten days. So there is no need to panic now. I am leaving for the moment, but Sister Sunita will stay here since she is a doctor. I will also come again in two or three days."

Hearing Dr. Sudhir's words, everyone felt a brief sense of relief. Then the uncle said, "Nephew, I don't interfere in anyone's matters, but from my experience, I can say this: during the day, the women stay alert, but not at night. Anyway, my village is not far. I rushed here as soon as I heard, but for now, I will go back. From tomorrow, I will come every evening and return at dawn. We will spend the night talking and keeping watch together."

Both brothers-in-law and the uncle left.

"Today is the seventh day since Mother stopped eating. Only a few spoonfuls of water and milk are keeping her alive," Ragini said to her husband as she came from the courtyard to the doorway.

Hearing this, Radheshyam began to think deeply. Memories of his family rose in his mind. He recalled how much hope his parents had placed in their four children, raising, educating, marrying them, and helping each one build a family. His eldest sister, Gauri, had an M.A. degree, and so did her husband. She worked as a teacher in a high school, and her husband taught in a college. Their family's reputation had grown steadily in society.

The youngest sister too was well-settled, she and her husband were both doctors. The middle sister and her husband were engineers, working together in Mumbai.

All three sisters were educated, and their husbands equally

accomplished. Father had an extraordinary eye for people; he could read character at a glance. That was why he had matched each daughter with a worthy husband. One set of parents, three daughters, educated in the same household, nurtured with the same love, yet how had such a gulf appeared among their ways of thinking?

This question still had no answer for Radheshyam. His thoughts kept circling, heavy and unsettled. On one side was his mother's failing body, on the other, his middle sister's indifference.

He drifted into the world of reflection, searching for clarity but finding none. His mind moved from his own family to those of his sisters.

Gauri's father-in-law, Umakant, was a high-school teacher. A B.A. graduate himself, his wife was barely literate and could not even write her own name. Her father had been a learned pandit, but he valued household skills more than education for his daughter, believing that a good wife should know how to manage a family, not how to read and write. Yet between Umakant and his wife Sarita there was deep affection. The schoolmaster's whole concern lay with his students and his own children, while Sarita ran the household with quiet efficiency. Life in those days was not scattered like today; it had order and rhythm.

Turning his thoughts from Gauri's home, Radheshyam considered his youngest sister, Dr. Sunita. Both she and her husband were doctors, a well-matched pair. Her father-in-law had been a traditional healer, an expert in herbs and roots. People respected him for his skill and insight. Determined to keep the family's medical line alive, he had made his son a doctor. His wife too was a woman of old discipline, tending the courtyard, gathering herbs from fields and forests, pounding them with her own hands while her husband prepared the medicines. The healer never trusted his wife to measure the doses; that was his work alone.

Then Radheshyam's thoughts moved to his middle sister, Rita. Her father-in-law had worked as a helper in the military's engineering department. Following his own reasoning, he had married a girl from another military family, good pay, uniform, authority. He carried himself with a certain stiffness, his temperament as rigid as the tools

he handled. Yet he had educated his children well. Rita had studied engineering, and so had her husband. Both now worked in a factory in Mumbai. Their earnings were good, their expenses heavy, and their ambitions even greater.

A sudden thought struck Radheshyam. It was his mother's final days, and perhaps he should call Rita once more. He picked up the phone and dialled her number.

"Hello, Rita. It's me, Radheshyam."

"Yes, Brother, I'm in the middle of some work with the staff right now."

Hearing Rita's words, Radheshyam stood silent. It was ten at night, the moonlit seventh evening. Between light and darkness a fierce struggle was unfolding. Moments ago, the moon's soft glow had ruled the sky, but now that very moon seemed to retreat, as darkness advanced with growing strength.

In that dim courtyard, his youngest sister, Dr. Sunita, came to him and said, "Brother, I am not God, but from the way Mother's condition is worsening, I feel she will not live beyond tomorrow evening."

Between his mother's final hours and Rita's cold response, Radheshyam's patience began to falter. He found himself standing at life's threefold crossroads. One path led toward divine grace, another toward the dark prison of selfishness, and in between stood Radheshyam, motionless. After a moment of resolve, he turned to Sunita and said, "Call Gauri here."

Sunita went out, called Gauri, and returned with her. Standing between his two sisters, Radheshyam spoke, "Sister, just as Rita is our sister, so are you both. So one of you should call her and tell her about Mother. I have made up my mind. If in this condition Mother does not seem worth her daughter's concern, then I too will not depend on her care in the future. If she doesn't come while Mother is alive, then after her death I will not even send word for the mourning rites. My relationship with her ends the moment Mother's breath ends. It is rightly said that brother and sister are like a buffalo's horns, born together but separate. I do feel like calling her right now and saying

everything plainly, but what would be the use? Let it be."

He grew agitated and said bitterly, "A bird flying in the sky, though having lineage, still has no family. How can a human being, with all his reason and wisdom, live without that sense of belonging? Why did God give us understanding if He wanted us to live like birds or beasts?"

As Radheshyam spoke, his own heart and those of both sisters seemed to break apart. Tears began to spill from their eyes. Everyone present was stunned by the sight of a bond between brother and sister beginning to fracture. In everyone's mind, the image of Rita came alive. From her childhood to her marriage, her whole life played before their eyes. On one side, she was racing ahead in the competition of Mumbai's restless life; on the other, she clung within their hearts like a photograph fastened to the wall. She was entangled in the web of her own family, just as one bamboo branch gets caught in the thicket while being cut from another.

The three women–Gauri, Sunita, and Ragini–sat beside their mother in silence. None of them spoke. Their eyes met, but no words came. Their minds were still and distant, like the white sands of Rameshwaram. On one side they saw life, vast as open land; on the other, death, deep as the sea. That, they thought, is life and its game, where every person eventually sacrifices the self upon its altar.

Then, suddenly, from the mother's fading lips came a whisper, "Rita..."

The sound of that name struck all three women like a bolt of pain. They shuddered.

It was eleven at night. The village slept. The moonlight was fading, and half-darkness covered the yard. Outside, on the veranda, Radheshyam sat with his eyes closed, thinking about his family line. His thoughts wandered: Tonight the moon of the seventh evening was setting, darkness was spreading, but would tomorrow's moon be any dimmer than todays? Would the new light not remember the darkness that came before? The struggle between light and shadow had always been and would always remain. He thought again, tonight might be his mother's last night. Thousands of nights had passed under her care, and now that long companionship was nearing its end.

Lost in thought, Radheshyam's mind drifted in and out like the rising and setting moon. At that moment, Shabana arrived with her granddaughter. Both stood silently on the path between the courtyard and the veranda, hesitant and afraid. Radheshyam, eyes closed, did not see them.

There had been tension between Hindus and Muslims in the neighbourhood, so Shabana had not dared to come by day; love for Sarojini had drawn her here at night. Rehna, the granddaughter, said softly, "Grandmother, why are you standing here? Let's go inside the courtyard."

Hearing Rehna's voice, Radheshyam opened his eyes and saw the two figures standing there. He asked quietly, "Who is it?"

Shabana said, "Son, Radhe."

"Aunty."

"Yes."

"Why did you come so late at night?"

"Child, don't you know what fires are burning from village to village? On the fifth day I heard that my sister was very ill. As soon as I heard, I wanted to come. But what could I do? My heart was restless. When I asked my son, he said, 'Do you not see what is happening on the roads? There is dishonour and violence. How can you go in such a situation?' Still, my heart would not listen. I lived my whole life with your family. Now that the poor woman is dying, I could not bear not to see her. So I brought my granddaughter along."

Rising from his chair, Radheshyam took Shabana by the arm and, leading her toward the yard, called out to his sister, "Aunty is here now. Give her some water to wash her feet."

Hearing him, both sisters and his wife Ragini came out into the yard. Gauri said, "Aunty Shabana."

"Yes."

Shabana and Rehna washed their feet and walked straight up to Sarojini. They grabbed her feet and began to weep. Seeing them, Sarojini asked, "Why are you crying? Am I about to die? Why did you come at this hour?"

Shabana said, “Sister, the roads are dangerous. In the past two years thievery and looting have become common. When I heard about you, my mind would not rest and I had to come. I could not come by day because of the situation, so at night I came like this.”

Sarojini replied sternly, “Are your children all right?”

Shabana answered, “They are fine in health, but the business is ruined.”

“Did you go toward the village?”

“No. How could I go? During the flood in the year before last your village was cut off by the river Kamla and our village ended up in the Kosi. Now I hear that our village is settled on the mound and your village is settled on the western post-flood embankments of the Kamla River. There is a road up to Ghanshyampur, but beyond that every path is broken. People who try to go get swept away.”

Sarojini signalled Gauri, “Daughter, it is very late. Feed Aunty, give her something to eat.”

Shabana said, “Sister, how can I eat first? First have Brother Radheshyam eat. After he eats he will sleep. I will sit up all night and talk with my sister. There is so much to say after so many days.”

Radheshyam listened to Shabana and thought to himself that sisters were never in short supply in this world. People judge who is close and who is distant. It is all a matter of the heart. Those who accompany you through joy and laughter are your own. He told Shabana, “Aunty, Mother is not just my mother nor only your sister. Everyone belongs to some one. So who truly belongs to whom?”

He slept on the eastern verandah. The others settled inside the house and began to talk. Gauri asked Aunty, “Aunty, you two come from different villages. When did you and our grandmother become known to each other?”

Shabana replied, “Since we were young. My father and your grandfather were friends. A league of villages used to lie to the east and another to the west. Those were beautiful villages once, though now everything is different.”

Gauri said, “Aunty, I went there a long time ago when I was a child. It used to be such a lovely place.”

Shabana agreed, “Yes, it was. But now you would hardly believe it if you saw it. As I said, your uncle once had large fields and livestock. There were four pairs of bullocks harnessed and four or five buffaloes. My father had no fields though. In our village there was a cloth depot. The whole village ran spinning wheels and wove cloth. My father was the best craftsman. Everyone at home carded and spun and wove. For saris, bedcovers, towels and dhotis, no one matched my father. People from your mother’s village used to buy cloth from my father. The two villages were linked. For five or seven years after that, I used to come here to eat and to visit.”

Hearing Shabana, Gauri was surprised. In her mind she thought, poverty on one side, Muslim on the other, and yet such friendship.

Ragini smiled and asked, “Aunty, which old story are you telling? Do you mean the two sisters were married on the same day?”

“Oh, child, what are you saying? My sister is two or three years older than me. She was married two years before me. Your uncle told my father that the eastern and southern districts had been washed away by the Kosi, so it would be better to move and spread out the family ties.”

After a short silence Shabana continued, “Daughter, that was a bad time. You know now how the work of the natal household has vanished. There is no khadi depot, no trade. What could we do? That life is gone. There is no business, no spinning, nothing.”

Ragini, still smiling, said, “Aunty, I hardly remember my own wedding. I do not know all those stories. Please tell me what was the cause of the quarrel in the wedding.”

Shabana laughed loudly, then said, “Your father was a real joker. He would never let anyone win in a joke. He came to observe the family for fixation of marriage. We two sisters teased him a lot. We placed breakable clay plates under the wooden seat on which he was to sit at the time of taking meal and served roasted cotton also in his plate. When he rose up after taking meal, we poured a bowl of black colour over him. But he didn't take it seriously. In the same way he too retaliated and teased the wedding party. He stained everybody's dhoti with rotten khair(the waste of mustard oil).At first, the wedding

guests quarrelled among themselves but when they learnt that it was the conspiracy of the bride's party, they came into conflict with them. However, the matter ended without any serious fight."

They all laughed.

Radheshyam lay on the verandah but could not sleep. He feared his mother might die unexpectedly. The night passed with stories and joking.

At dawn Shabana told Radheshyam, "Child, I think that I should leave only after paying my last offering at my sister's funeral. But I have a fear in view of the widespread communal feeling all around."

Radheshyam replied, "Aunty, no one here can harm you. As long as you want to stay, be fearless."

Shabana said, "Child, I want to wash all the clothes of my sister. Who knows when such a day will come again?"

Radheshyam answered, "What shall I say between you two sisters, aunty? Do whatever your heart tells you." ❑

Match-seeker's Visit

☰

As soon as Lukhiya woke, her eyes fell on the day's endless work. The very thought of it wearied her. She tried to rise, tying resolve to her heart, but her gaze lifted toward the eastern roof. The thatch over the porch had been ripped off in the storm. The bare rafters gleamed white like bones.

"What will the groom's people say now?" she thought. "They'll mock that, of course, the roof is ruined, it's a widow's house."

A sting of anger rose in her chest. Clicking her tongue, she muttered, "Cursed be both the storm and those greedy crows which come flocking, tearing away the thatch straw by straw, scattering it everywhere."

Her eyes then dropped to the southern boundary. The rain had washed away its straws; only its bamboo sticks remain standing, leaving the courtyard visible from the southern bamboo thicket. Seeing it, her heart sank deeper. She thought of hanging an old sari to cover the gap, but what use? Wouldn't the visitors' eyes still catch it? A sari can't hide ruin. They would see everything.

Her thoughts grew heavy. "Lord," she sighed, "what will they think of this house?"

Her irritation turned toward her brother-in-law, Nagesar. "What was the need to fix the visit just for tomorrow? If only he had waited a few more days, I would have cleaned the courtyard and repaired the boundary. Was my son drowning in the flood that the day had to be chosen in such haste? What harm in waiting five days?"

Her anger flared again. Her eyes moved from the boundary down to the courtyard. Small puddles shimmered across the uneven earth. Some stood quietly, but others seeped away at the edges,

swallowing the ground. The whole yard would need at least ten baskets of fresh soil to smooth it, ten baskets to dig, break, level, and pack. That alone would take an entire day.

And then, how would the rest of the work ever be done before the match-seeker came?

Lukhiya was pressed down by the work. The gloom tightened. Weariness kept rising. She lay half sprawled, weighed down by the load. What could just the two of them, mother and son, do? And today, of all days, how could she tell him to do anything? After all, the match-seeker is coming to observe none but him. The boy has a lot of work to do. He has to get his hair dressed. He needs to wash his clothes and get them ironed. He would bathe with scented soap. He would oil his hair and comb it. He would sit on the honoured seat. How could she tell him to carry the hoe and the small spade? Iron is heavy; he may be injured. What would people say if they saw him with bandages on his hands and feet?

A darker sorrow slid over Lukhiya's mind. As that sorrow deepened, her eyes moved to the food preparations for the guest. Other tasks could, with effort, be finished, but milk must be boiled a day in advance. If that is not done, how will there be curd? In auspicious work, if there is no curd, how can one hope for the success? It is known to all that cattle-owners dilute milk with water without shame. We have no new clay pots that can absorb water.

Anger rose again in her chest. Yet when her gaze reached the rice and lentils, the anger faltered. The bride's people will come to see the bridegroom. How could she serve those coarse lentils and cheap rice? What will neighbours and relatives think? Even if no one speaks, the family name will suffer. If dignity is lost, then what is life worth?

As she worked, Lukhiya suddenly remembered the small pot of fine kanakjeer rice kept aside. The thought of serving that fragrant rice to the new in-laws softened her heart; it melted like wax and began to flow. In her mind, she started pairing the rice with the right lentil. Lentil lovers, she knew, liked the match to be perfect. Fine rice with fine dal would go well, but such lentils were not used for ceremonial feasts. On those occasions, it had to be gram or rahar dal. But there was no rahar at home.

The floods had been coming for two years now, washing away everything; not a single pod of rahar had grown. Her thoughts tangled again. What kind of dish would rahar dal be without mango slices to give it taste? If only it were mango season, she would have added a few raw mango pieces for flavour, but that, too, was not possible now.

Her mind wandered further. It was her first time becoming the samdhin, the mother of the bridegroom . How could she let the guests eat without a full set of eleven dishes? She began to plan in silence. While thinking, she remembered bar-bari and adauri, special dishes for such occasions. But how could all that be prepared in a single day? Making besan-paste itself would take three days. How could it all be managed?

Her irritation rose again, the anger boiling back. "All this trouble is Nagesar's doing," she muttered. "Until I scold that man properly, he'll never learn any sense. What kind of man sets the day without asking? If this is how men are, better to have women handle everything."

Nagesar had gone toward the river. Not finding him at home, Lukhiya began grumbling aloud from the doorstep. Nagesar's wife, Bhurkuria, listened quietly. She didn't speak. She thought to herself, "This is between brother-in-law and sister-in-law; why should I interfere?"

Lukhiya's anger, once spent, gave way to the ache in her stomach. As she ran short of her agitating thoughts, the fire within cooled. Seeing her words soften, Bhurkuria said gently, "Come to the veranda, sister. Have a smoke; it will ease your mind."

She brought out a bundle of bidi and matches. The two women sat together on the porch, talking as they lit up. Striking a match, Bhurkuria said, "Sister, even Pihu will soon grow into a youth. His voice has already begun to change."

Hearing Bhurkuria, Lukhiya was taken aback. The thought of her lively son filled her with a small, shy joy. Seeing Lukhiya brighten, Bhurkuria added, "He will be even more vigorous than his father."

Happiness swelled in Lukhiya's chest. She said, "Sister, I do

my best for his proper nourishment. God, in his mercy, gave us only a son. If he is not happy, then why did we toil so hard? My husband wanted to marry him off the last year itself, but he left before that could happen. Now a year has passed. This time we will somehow get him married."

With that she moved toward the courtyard. As she stepped out, Lukhiya's thoughts returned to Nagesar. What fault could be laid at him? Had he done anything truly wrong? It was not as if he lacked a fatherly feeling for his daughter-in-law. Yet he had delayed the work. Being poor does not mean that one lacks dignity. Dignity must be preserved. This is a new household. New relatives will arrive. How could she serve them only five spoonfuls of food? Hospitality is not measured only by the gifts of cloth and money. It is also measured by how guests are treated. One must behave toward guests as they ought to be treated.

A gloom rose in Lukhiya's mind. What sort of men are these who do not know how to marry off their daughters or sons? She thought of the tea and the refreshments. Those things must be arranged. It should not be that one thing is done and the other is left. Tea and snacks must be ready. Bidi and tobacco must be set out. This is not a town market where people perform one or two rituals. This is the village. Here some persons are addicted to ten to fifteen habits or obsessions.

Lost in her thoughts, Lukhiya became still. She felt a heaviness in her chest. Her eyes began to fill with tears. The idea that the house belonged to men kept returning to her. At once she stepped aside and looked down the path where Nagesar would come. From the direction of the river she caught sight of him approaching. On seeing him she called out, "Tomorrow the match-seeker will come and you are strolling about carelessly."

Nagesar said, "All right, come. Let's sit and think everything through."

They both walked toward the courtyard. Turning toward Pihu who was sweeping the courtyard, Nagesar said, "You are smoothing the outskirt here. We have to do a lot of work. First, we have to finish outside work. Go soon and get your hair trimmed first."

Setting down the broom, Pihu left. Lukhiya's gaze softened. Like the way a coloured glass changes how one sees the world, her eyes saw Nagesar in a new light. Seeing this changed man, affection welled up in her heart. She said fondly, "Why did you fix such a close date? If only you should have given four more days. How can all the work be done in just one?"

To ease her worry, Nagesar said calmly, "Today is just the first visit. The groom-observer will come to see the house and family, not to feast. If they like what they see, they will return for food and talk of marriage. If not, they'll take their path home. For now, they're just travellers, so there's no need for a grand welcome. When Pihu is liked and the wedding date is fixed, then there'll be plenty of feasting. Why hurry now as if you must become samdhin (groom's mother) tomorrow? Maybe you'll even end up playing Holi with the in-laws."

Hearing "Playing Holi with the in-laws," Lukhiya's heart leapt. She smiled and said, "Why should I wait for samaidh (bride's father) for playing Holi when I have my brother-in law with me?"

Her worry melted away, replaced by a faint smile. "Still," she added, "If even travellers come to the door, won't I at least offer them a pot of water?"

Nagesar replied, "Of course you will. That's the kind of respect our fathers and grandfathers taught us, it's our true inheritance."

Delighted, Lukhiya laughed softly. "Men's ways are beyond me."

Nagesar said, "I'll go to the market in a while. I'll buy whatever is needed. Why trouble yourself so much? Guests aren't honoured by rich dishes but by food served with love. Have you cleaned the mat for them to sit on? Pull out the old pillow cover."

She replied, "There's no pillow cover left. I've made one from an old sari. You may bring two new covers when you go to the market."

"Excellent," said Nagesar.

The next evening, sitting in the courtyard, he asked Pihu, "When they ask your name, what will you say?"

Pihu replied, "Don't I already know my name? I know father's

name, mother's name, and even our village name."

"That's not what I'm asking. Speak your full name yourself."

"Pihu."

"Foolish boy. Don't say Pihu, say Pushpalal."

"But my name isn't Pushpalal. People used to call me that before, but now everyone calls me Pihu. People's names change, don't they?"

Smiling faintly, Lukhiya said, "Do people call you Pihu just in jest, or is that your real name?"

It was on the sixth night after his birth that his parents had named him Pushpalal. When he was eight or ten, in the cold month after the harvest, he started working in the paddy fields. Pihu and silli (water birds) would wade into the flooded plots to eat paddy. He trapped them in the net. He ate theme and sold a few of them. Later, the village women began calling him Pihuawā, the boy from the paddy. Later even his sisters-in-law shortened it to Pihua. But neither Pihu himself nor his parents ever felt bad about it. Thus, Pushpalal gradually became Pihu.

Inwardly, Nagesar thought, "This Pihu won't learn easily. Even if I teach him now, he'll blurt out the wrong name when the time comes. May be it's better to give him some real responsibility." He turned to Lukhiya and said, "Open the bundle and check if everything is there."

The two of them, brother-in-law and sister-in-law, began sorting the items. When they reached the dhoti, a disagreement arose. Nagesar had bought only one pair of dhotis for the kanyagat–the bride's family–thinking that they didn't usually wear dhotis. But Lukhiya had forgotten that. She said sharply, "Two people will come, so what good is just one pair? At least we should send a full set. Those who have more, give five pieces of cloth at the farewell."

Trying to keep peace, Nagesar said, "I still have a dhoti from my in-laws' place. If needed, I'll give that."

"It's dyed pink," Lukhiya replied. "We'll dye this one pink too. I've already bought the colour."

The next morning, at exactly seven o'clock, the two men from

the bride's family arrived. Nagesar had prepared everything beforehand. In the guest room, a clean bedding was spread, and a new coverlet neatly laid at the head.

As soon as the guests arrived, Nagesar took the thenga-chhatta (walking sticks and umbrellas) from their hands and placed them respectfully by the door. Then he poured water into a lota for them to wash their feet. Meanwhile, Lukhiya slipped through the back path toward the courtyard to bring tea and betel leaves.

By the time the two guests–Domon and Buchan–had washed and settled themselves comfortably, Lukhiya returned from the courtyard with tea and snacks. Nagesar's eyes were sharp in both directions. Seeing her approach, he told Pihu, "Go, son, bring the tea."

Pihu asked, "And the betel too?"

"Bring the tea first. The betel can come later," Nagesar replied.

Domon heard Pihu's voice. There was no longer any need for formal questions about names or family. The boy's voice, his manner, his broad frame, all spoke for him. Domon liked what he saw. With a small signal of his eyes, he asked Buchan's opinion. Buchan answered with the same silent nod. A smile flickered on both their faces.

Yet even as Domon smiled, a trace of doubt crept into his mind. This was a household without a man and woman together, a widowed sister-in-law and her brother-in-law holding the family. He wondered whether some small obstacle might still appear and spoil things.

After finishing tea and chewing betel, Domon said to Nagesar, "Brother, until the meal is ready, let's take a walk toward the riverbank. And one more thing, don't make too many kinds of dishes. For the past week we've been eating fish every day, and my stomach's been upset. At home I would have eaten thin rice gruel with banana or roasted corn. That won't happen here, of course. So just make rice, lentils, and one vegetable, maybe sajmain or jhimini, and go easy on the spices."

Nagesar tucked his bundle of bidi and matches into his pocket and went out to tell Lukhiya. But Lukhiya had already overheard everything from the doorway. Her heart sank, yet she answered

sharply, “And all that vegetable and spice we’ve gathered, what will happen to it now? If they won’t eat, I’ll pack it up for Somdhini (bride's mother).” Seeing the bride's mother trapped in helplessness like a fish caught in a drying pond, Domon said, “Then what else can we do? We’ll tie you up too in the bundle and carry it on our shoulders.”

Nagesar pressed his eyes shut, trying to stop Lukhiya from speaking further. But her words didn’t move toward the visitors; they turned toward Nagesar instead. “You are very clever,” she said sharply. “You think just because you’ve fixed your son’s marriage, you’ve found good in-laws and a fine match, you can handle everything your way.”

Hearing her, Nagesar felt a strange relief. She had released her anger, and with that, the tension broke. Otherwise, their quarrels would have kept repeating.

Finding the moment right, Domon raised his voice, “Brother, will we stay here flirting with the samdhins or shall we get going?”

Lukhiya was tempted to retort in jest. She promptly blurred, "It appears that you alone have a darling betterhalf.”

Smiling faintly, Nagesar stepped out of the courtyard and headed toward the embankment. Domon kept looking around, observing the village and its houses. As they came out of the village, he paused, turned westward, and took to a one-way path. Nagesar followed and with the gesture of his hand he spoke to the guests, “The line of trees you see toward the west marks the village boundary.”

The two guests nodded. Domon asked, “And to the north?”

Pointing again, Nagesar said, “That mound you see there, that’s the northern edge.”

“And the southern side?”

“Those three or four small trees you see standing together mark the southern boundary. Those are peerar trees.”

Domon, measuring the land with his eyes, silently signalled to Buchan to notice it too. Both men roughly estimated that the embankment stretched over two hundred bighas.

At that point, Nagesar spoke again, “Brother, it was once part

of our father's estate, but later we two brothers divided it. The northern part is mine, and the southern belongs to my nephew."

Domon asked, "Where have you built your hut?"

The question brought back painful memories. Pointing toward the bamboo grove, Nagesar said, "Between that grove and the small orchard lies a ditch. It's full of Bisanari trees. During the rainy season it is filled with water. The bamboo leaves and the fallen bisanari leaves rot there. The water turns black and still. Clouds of mosquitoes rise from it. It was there that my brother was bitten by one carrying kala-azar. We tried every medicine, every remedy, but nothing could save him."

Domon asked, "Doesn't the government hospital give out medicine for this?"

Nagesar replied, "If it did, would so many people be dying? More than twenty people from our village have died of kala-azar. There's nothing in that hospital. It's just a building of bricks standing there. The medicines, the tables, the chairs, everything has been sold off."

As he spoke, Nagesar's eyes were filled with tears. He wiped them with his gamchha (towel) and walked ahead. The three of them reached the small hut near the embankment. In the middle of the embankment lay two kathas of fallow land. On that open patch stood the huts of both families and five scattered trees-two sahor, two pitohiya, and one bajarkera. The sahor trees were the oldest yet the smallest in height, while the bajarkera, though the youngest, was the tallest of them all. Beneath the pitohiya tree, the three men sat down on the soft grass to talk.

Domon asked, "How do the landlords pay their share?"

"Five dhur of paddy or wheat per bigha," Nagesar answered.

"And what about the Rabi crops, the pulses and oilseeds?"

"It's by estimation only. We do the harvest work also. For that we get the wages in addition. Those we divide roughly."

The two guests, Domon and Buchan, began calculating silently. If each katha yielded one quintal that would mean twenty-five kilos per bigha; even if it was half that, it would still come to twelve and a

half kilos. The embankment covered more than two hundred bighas. That meant at least twenty-five or may be twelve quintals of paddy every year. And after that, there was wheat, millet, and all kinds of pulses and oilseeds.It was much more than what the two-mother and son- needed, Domon thought. My daughter would never go hungry here.

He smiled and looked toward his son. The boy glanced back at his father, and with a small exchange of eyes, they understood each other. After a pause, Domon asked Nagesar, "What kind of crops do you grow here now?"

"Five years ago," Nagesar said, "the land still gave plenty of grain. We used to grow mustard and vegetables in small patches too. But now farming is changing."

Smiling, he went on, "What can I say? I feel like a king. We count those two hundred bighas as our ancestral property. We are the owners of those two hundred bighas. Once upon a time, when we used to give a loud cry, the young grass-cutter women would rush out. Now that is not done. No one is prohibited to cut grass in fallow land and embankment."

After a pause he added, "Yes, ever since people sank borewells and canals reached the fields, wealth and prosperity pervade from the house to the field. You can see someone transplanting seedlings and some others uprooting them. If one person is digging, another is cutting paddy. One will be carrying loads, another drying the harvest. Someone will be threshing while another pounding rice at the mill. Someone will be winnowing, some others parching. Who can count it all?"

Domon asked, "Have other kinds of crops started to be grown?"

Nagesar said, "What can I say, a hundred kinds of paddy are being planted now. There is so much variety that the very name of paddy becomes confusing. Along with paddy, with fertilizer and water, wheat and pulses are also being cultivated. In the old days people grew mustard and small patches of vegetables. Now sunflower cultivation has also begun. People are growing every sort of vegetable in bulk. In ten bighas you will find fifteen or twenty grafted mango

saplings planted. What can I say, people are planting Andhra mangoes, Madras mangoes, and all sorts of strange varieties. If you plant them this season, they will give fruits next year. What looks good will taste good too.”

Domon asked, “What emoluments do you get for caretaking mango-groves?”

“As a rule, we get one out of three ungrafted mangoes and one out of four grafted mangoes, " answered Nagesar. He added,

“It is so on the day of harvest. On other days fallen fruits are not counted. Some mangoes are so good that children start eating them in their undeveloped stage. Sour mangoes are limed and turned sweet. The children have grown clever enough to pick mangoes from the courtyard, eat them right away by liming them.”

Domon asked, “Are there any other earnings from the farms?”

Nagesar replied, “I do not remember everything.”

Pointing with his finger to the south he continued, "There are about twenty bighas of deep fields where crops were washed away by flood every year but now the farmers have got them dug a little deeper and turned them into ponds for fish farming. There’s a kind of fish from Andhra Pradesh called Elish.It is more tasteful than our Rehu fish. It grows faster and tastes richer. And who can stop me? I am the one who manages the lease. Whenever I feel like it, I take my hook and line, catch two, and we feast on them. The hardest part now is the cooking. There’s no time left for it. Who has the leisure to cook with so much labour in the fields? The sun is already overhead. Come, lunch must be ready by now. Hot food tastes best when eaten fresh.”

The three men started back toward the house from the crop-field. A little ahead, near the bamboo grove, they heard a bird calling. Its song was strange and rhythmic. Smiling, Nagesar asked Domon, “Tell me, what do you think that bird is saying?”

Domon tilted his head and listened carefully. “It’s saying, ‘Paan, bidi, cigarette,’” he said.

Hearing this, Nagesar burst out laughing. After a moment he said, “This bird won’t be found in your parts. It came here when the Kosi floods arrived. It calls out, ‘Badma, Bisun, Mahesh.’”

Because of their different ways of hearing, they all began to listen more intently. Domon and Buchan both tried to catch the sound again. Nagesar, wanting to prove his version right, listened just as carefully. Silence fell among them, each caught in his own uncertainty. Finally, Domon turned to his son. “You’ve studied in school, haven’t you? You tell us what it says.”

No one likes to admit defeat, not even in a simple question. Domon’s mind was turning over the puzzle. Buchan replied thoughtfully, “Father, I think it’s saying, ‘Tulsi, Sur, Kabir.’”

Three men, three answers. There was no room left for argument. Each kept his own version, amused and thoughtful. Quietly, one behind another, they walked back toward the house.

As soon as they reached home, Domon said, “Bring the lota. I’ll go toward the edge of the field for toilet.”

Nagesar brought two lotas of water from the courtyard and handed them over. Looking at them, Buchan asked, “Father, don’t they have a hand pump or tap ahead?”

Before he could finish, Domon cut in sharply, “You’re still a child; you don’t understand such things.” He said this and walked toward the orchard.

Reaching the grove, both father and son sat under a tall sarahi (ungrafted) mango tree and began to talk. Buchan said, “Father, it’s a decent family for marriage.Marriage, friendship and enmity should be made between similars. The boy’s father is gone, but what difference does that make? People in the village often look down upon widows, but this family seems steady.”

Domon listened quietly, nodding now and then, though his mind was busy thinking about the family’s income and their sense of management. From what he had seen, the earnings were plenty, but the ability to organize them was lacking. If both sides learned to work on the same level, the household would move forward quickly. The farm was vast. Grass might grow endlessly, but guarding it was no big task, just walking across one side to the other once or twice every day.

If the boy took charge properly, he wouldn’t remain idle, and the income would certainly increase. Marrying his daughter into this

house, he thought, would bring her a capable and resourceful partner.

He smiled inwardly and thought of his daughter, Janaki. She was clever in every way, she could handle weights and measures from the smallest to the largest. She understood all the local units: kanma, adhpai, pauwa, asera, ser, adhaia, paser, dhara, man, up to bora and quintal. She also knew the smaller trade counts: kaudi means twenty, sore sixteen, sorha-sore sixteen by sixteen, dozen twelve, gross twelve dozen, pair two, gahi five, ganda four, palla one, and so on. Pleased, he said aloud, "Son, Janaki will manage the household well. She'll even tend two cows if she has to. That alone will increase their milk income. But they should expand their farming too. It would be good if we gave them one cow and one ox. With an ox and a ploughman, two workers would become part of the family, and they could cultivate two or three bighas more."

Buchan looked up and asked simply, "But they don't have their own field, do they?"

Hearing Buchan, Domon laughed. He said, "Son, the time has come when many who once farmed have left the fields to find work. Farming is suffering for lack of hands. Household life has grown messy. What is needed is hard work in the fields, but many farmers do not understand that."

Buchan asked, "How will they understand?"

Domon grew serious. "Listen, farming needs skill and judgment. Yet day by day it is falling into the hands of the foolish, have you noticed?"

After some debate both men agreed that the match should proceed. Still one knotty question stood in front of them. How could a marriage be properly settled without a clear plan for using money properly? Pondering that, they walked back toward the house.

As Domon came from the fields, Lukhiya ran to and fro across the courtyard four or five times, watching the gate. Her heart was fluttering. She feared some slip in the alliance would ruin everything. People would say she took charge because she had no man, that a widow's house runs wild without a husband. They say, "A widow is a bull."

Then another thought rose in her: after all, this marriage will be for her son. She will not leave any loophole for anyone to exploit. She will act just as the bride's people demand. If the two households match well, who will dare raise an eyebrow? With that resolve she saw the visitors approaching. She ran from the gate into the courtyard and began arranging the plates, calling out cheerfully. After washing their hands, Nagesar told Domon, "First, sit and eat."

Carrying lotas of water, Nagesar and the two guests entered the courtyard. They sat on the cot. Nagesar brought the plates and placed them in front. Domon glanced around and said, "Brother, get the samdhin seated nearby, so we can speak privately. Finalize all the marriage matters now. If we wait for the public meeting, people will swarm in and the talk will go every where."

With a nod, Nagesar called his sister-in-law to sit. Domon continued, "Ask the samdhin how they will conduct the wedding."

Lukhiya spoke up before Nagesar could answer. "You men talk as you please. I don't crave anything. Let a good family come into this house. That is enough."

Silently Nagesar thought, it matters little that I get so much importance. After all it is not the negotiation of my son or daughter. He said, "Brother, you speak. Tell us how you will arrange things."

Domon added, "Brother-in-law, my daughter's marriage will be held as your nephew's, won't it?"

To please Lukhiya he went on, "My daughter is pure luck. Even if you search for ten years, you will not find such a girl. Now people do not bring daughters to the door, only money."

Nagesar, watching his sister-in-law on the veranda, said, "There will be some expenses, of course."

Lukhiya cut him off, "No. I will not take anyone's daughter into my house as a purchase."

Nagesar fell silent at her words. Smiling, Lukhiya said, "When he has come to our door for the hand of my son for his daughter, we will give him away. What do I need? Only two square a meal and a few meters of cloth. The house will now belong to them."

Domon said, "Brother, We'll give proper welcome to the few

persons who will come as the members of the marriage party. Along with that, whatever things are needed for the new house of the bride and groom, we'll provide. And in addition, we'll gift one ox and one milking cow."

At this, everyone burst into laughter. The wedding day was thus decided. Smiling, Lukhiya said, "Now what more can I add? Can I demand samdhin (bride's mother) too? Wonderful!"

Laughing loudly, Domon replied, "Ha-ha, wonderful indeed. Then it will be all the more excellent."

By four in the afternoon, after a short rest, tea, and betel, Domon said to Nagesar, "Brother, everything is settled now. We should leave."

Nagesar brought out two pairs of dhotis from the courtyard and placed them in front of him. Looking at them, Domon said, "Brother, we may be poor, but we've kept our honour. How could I wear such cloth at my daughter's door?"

Standing near the veranda, Lukhiya had been watching silently. Hearing Domon's words, she stepped forward and said, "Tell brother that when the daughter comes here, it will become her home. Until then, this house is mine, and I am the one giving it."

Domon laughed heartily. "So when my daughter comes here, will she be my samdhin right away, not now?"

At that moment, Pihu bent down to touch their feet. Domon smiled and placed twenty-one rupees in his hand.

As they walked down the path, Nagesar called out, "Brother, go on ahead.The auspicious day of marriage is only nine days away. Today you begin your preparations, and I'll start mine."

Domon and his son departed. Ahead of them was the joy of the daughter's wedding, but in his mind one thought kept echoing, Lukhiya's words: "I will never bring anyone's daughter into my house for money."

A chill ran through him. He looked at his son. The boy too was now of marriageable age… ❑

Regret

☰

As soon as the engineering results were declared, Raghunath began preparing to go to America with his friends for a job. Returning home from his in-laws' place, he said to his father, "Babu, I'll catch the evening train today. The plane will take off from Subhash Chandra Airport the day after tomorrow at ten."

Just as someone climbs a tree to pluck a ripe mango but slips and falls before reaching it, the same shock struck Shivnath. Startled, he asked, "Why? Is there no work for you here?"

Raghunath, silent for a moment, replied softly, "They pay more there. And the value of their currency is higher than ours."

Shivnath knew little about America, only that it was another country. He remained quiet for a while, then said slowly, "So what? We belong to the lineage that took bullets to end slavery and gifted freedom to this nation. If the educated ones like you leave, who will serve the country and how?"

Ignoring his father's words, Raghunath touched his feet, picked up his bag, and left without another word. Shivnath and his wife kept their eyes fixed on his back until he disappeared behind the grove. The moment he vanished, their hearts shattered like a mirror struck by stone. All their hopes, all their dreams, once vast and full, burst and vanished into the air like the wind escaping a punctured balloon.

When the floodwaters recede from the fields, fresh shoots begin to sprout where the soil is wet. In the same way new thoughts began to rise in Shivnath's mind. The world might still look like the village he lived in, but the distance between father and son was growing by thousands of miles. Were they turning back toward the road of slavery or walking forward on the path of freedom? On one side stood his

father's sacrifice for the motherland, on the other his son's uncertain journey.

His father's words before he died returned to him like a voice from another room. He had said twenty-four hours before death, "Son, my blood is the blood of heroes. It fought to free India. There may be new battles now, but that blood will not surrender freedom. You must be citizens of a free nation. Treat the country like family, serve everyone honestly as brothers and sisters. That will keep my soul at peace. Service does not only mean defending borders. It also means laying bricks to build roads and turning every patch of land into grain."

As those words came back, Shivnath's heart, once liquid with grief, began to harden like stone. New ideas woke up and took root. Seeing his wife's drooping face, he asked gently, "Why are you so downcast?"

Wiping her eyes on the corner of her sari, Rukmini answered in a trembling voice, "What dream did I cherish and what reality do I face now? If I knew it, I had not taken so much strain and let him go like a stray dog."

Hearing his wife's pain, Shivnath's heart was moved. Yet he concealed his sorrow and said with a smile, "So far our life has been one of duty. I have lived by duty honestly. Everyone should stand his life on his own hopes. Just as each raindrop finds its way and at last reaches the boundless sea, so we must cast our work beyond the household into the larger sea of society. We have a son, so we want to give him the burden, but those who have no son, on whom will they place their burden? We should take the matter in this way. Our father left for us so much wealth that we can live a very happy life with honour."

The year 1942 swept the whole country into the non-cooperation movement. Mithila's share in that struggle was no less. People for miles around were fired with such passion that they pictured the flag of freedom flying at dawn and dusk. By night they would rise from their beds, sip tea, and march into the streets shouting slogans. If sages like Yajnavalkya, Gautam and Narad were born here, so were local heroes like Panchanan Jha and Puran Mandal who were

modern Abhimanyu.Brave men from nearby villages wrapped shrouds over their heads, hoisted flags on their lathis, set fire to the jail circle, railway station and post office, and gathered in the open ground. The British troops were stationed at the circle. Seeing the demonstrators assemble, the soldiers loaded their rifles. The protesters advanced, chanting “Bharat Mata Ki Jai”. The troops fired. Not one but many bullets struck Panchanan and Puran in the chest. Both fell while shouting slogans. Many soldiers were wounded by gunfire as well. Among the wounded was Shivnath’s father, Devanath? A bullet hit his right thigh. Flesh and skin were torn, bone broken, yet he too collapsed. His brothers bound the dangling flesh of his thigh with strips of cloth, lifted him on their backs, and carried him home. There was no proper medical care. The soldiers began to terrorize villages. They set houses on fire. Men and women were dragged, beaten with rifle butts and booted feet until they lost consciousness. Fire burned in Devanath’s heart but his strength was gone. He lay between life and death. On the thirtieth day his breath departed.

When Shivnath was ten, the year was 1937. By the time India gained independence on August 15, 1947, he had turned fifteen. His father had died, yet his mother Radha did not break. She shone brighter, like gold tested in fire. Her heart grew stronger, like the pit of a ripe mango. The lamp dimmed by slavery found new oil and wick in freedom, and its flame rose anew.

Mother and son together began to rebuild what had fallen apart. They worked in the small two-and-a-half bighas of land as if it were their world and their sacred field of duty. Their effort built a modest but solid home. Though Shivnath had been married as a child, the bride had not yet come to live with him. Seeing her son’s growing responsibilities, Radha brought her daughter-in-law home.

With independence, schools began to be opened across the villages. Only a few persons were educated in the villages but they devoted themselves to teaching. The result was that almost every large village got a lower primary school; some had middle or high schools, and in a few places, even colleges were built. Most schools were established not by the state but by social co-operation.The people regarded schools as sacred places. Teachers worked for food,

living by whatever was offered on Saturdays. To teach for money was seen as sin. Only in middle and high schools, and later in colleges, were small monthly fees were collected to support the institutions.

As schools and colleges opened, the light of learning began to glow, but it was like a small lamp burning in mustard oil when what was needed was the blaze of a thousand volts. There were even Sanskrit schools here and there, but their light too was faint.

Three years after his wife's arrival, Shivnath had a son. When Raghunath was born, Radha's heart overflowed like a basket full of ripe grain. She saw in him the tender shoot of bamboo that keeps sprouting, growing tall, strong, and graceful. She felt that the world was like a garden full of flowers. Every field bloomed with paddy, every grove with mango, jamun, and guava blossoms. Yet, like the monsoon sky darkened by heavy clouds where only brief rays of sunlight escape through small gaps and cling to the treetops, the earth below remaining dim, Their lives were reflections of light and shadow, light above and shadow below.

When Raghunath was six months old, Radha would hold him close and brighten her face, trying to make him say "da-da." In that sound she saw the image of Devanath, his head wrapped with the turban of a freedom fighter, a red flag tied to his bamboo staff, smiling as he faced bullets.

When Raghunath turned four, Shivnath enrolled him in the village school. Year after year he progressed, moving from the middle school to Kejriwal High School in Jhanjharpur. He loved science, but he was equally drawn to English, which earned him special affection from Thakur Babu and Latti Babu.

Four years later, Raghunath passed his matriculation with first division marks. Because of floods and droughts, farming yielded little, and the household struggled. Studying outside the village seemed impossible. Yet luck favoured him when science classes began at Janta College, and Raghunath took admission there.

A year after his admission, Radha–his grandmother–passed away. Shivnath had not been able to perform his father's last rites properly, but for his mother he organized them with full devotion. He even sold five kathas of land, yet his mind felt no sorrow, for the

ceremony was held with honour and joy.

Two years later, Raghunath passed his I.Sc examination in the first division, scoring above seventy percent. The result filled Shivnath with pride and hope. Selling land meant no loss for him. He thought, “Once Raghunath completes his education, he will either work or farm. Then what need will there be for land? Through him, I will give society a capable man.”

Shivnath did not really know how expensive it was to study engineering or medicine. He only thought, “If I sell five or ten kathas of land, I can educate my son.” The thought itself filled him with energy. Believing that education was an investment, he sold two kathas from his homestead of land and got Raghunath admitted to an engineering college.

Within a year and a half of admission, half of his land was gone. With two and a half years of study still left, worry began to settle in. He realized that expenses would not be met even after selling all his fields. After much thought, he came to a conclusion that he would get Raghunath married. Marriage would not stop him from studying, he reasoned; the bride’s dowry and gifts might even ease their financial strain. “After five years, they can live together,” he told himself. The plan seemed sensible, and a calm joy returned to his heart.

Then another thought arose that times had changed.There was a time when parents arranged their children’s marriage without asking them, considering it their duty. But now they thought it essential to get thir consent. Reading the situation, Raghunath agreed to marry but on one condition: the girl must be beautiful. Had he asked for intelligence or virtue, the father might have hesitated, but beauty was a simpler demand. Shivnath began searching for a match.

Because the groom was an engineer, several offers were received immediately, though every proposal brought some flaw, some villages were not decent, some families lacked good lineage, some girls were not beautiful, others too old. Finally, one match worked out. The village wasn’t particularly good, but the girl was fair, and her family agreed to bear the wedding expenses.

The marriage took place. Afterward, both father and son agreed

that frequent visits and costly rituals should be avoided. They decided to keep things simple, and both held to that resolve.

After completing his final engineering exams, Raghunath gathered his belongings and went to his in-laws' home. His formal "duraagaman" ceremony was still pending, but after all, in-laws are in-laws. Since the exam results would take three months and there was no immediate work, he thought it better to spend some time there.

Ten days later, news spread that several engineering vacancies had opened abroad, most of them in America. The rise of new technology marked the beginning of a new era. New machines gave birth to a new generation of engineers. But the old machines and the old engineers, still useful and alive, began to be discarded like forgotten tools. Just as cholera swept through the villages, wiping out lives, engineers too began to lose their job one after the other. There was no factory or schemes to employ them.

Raghunath's exam had gone well, so there was no fear of failure. Since high school, he had read in books and magazines about America's progress and luxury and had heard people speak of it with awe. The very thought of it tickled his mind. It was another matter that within eight months, eighty banks in America had gone bankrupt.

Raghunath passed with first division marks. The first division result and a job offer from America filled him with unbounded joy. Eight days after applying, he received his appointment letter. His parents sold his wife's ornaments to arrange the tickets. His father-in-law, who had funded his education, refused to pay for the travel expenses.

Lansing, the capital of the state of Michigan, was a land of cold winds. It had none of the six seasons of home, none of its humour, nor the green laughter of its trees. Their small apartment on the seventeenth floor had three tiny rooms and a narrow balcony where sunlight rarely entered and no crow ever came to sit and caw the morning's news. Fifteen years passed as Raghunath and his wife lived there. All the dreams of youth seemed to freeze in their minds.

Raghunath's going to America did not make Shivnath's life blossom. Instead, it hardened like the reed stalks that grow dry and brittle in the sun. Both husband and wife grew silent, their minds

thick with thought. Blood ties thinned and dried, while social ties became thick and coarse like the vines of a strangler fig. Just as families slowly forget their dead members, Shivnath and his wife too forgot their son little by little. The shade of remembrance lasted for a year, and even the small rites faded away.

Shivnath could see, with his own eyes, the slow extinction of his lineage. In a free nation, the minds of its people were turning slaves again. How could he not forget? He never tried to write a single letter to his son, nor did he keep any unspoken wish alive within him. He was not a learned man, but in village gatherings he had heard enough tales from the Harivansh Purana to know that even the gods grieved when a family line was broken.

After independence, the people of Vikaspur began to think differently. How could they not? Except for the old and the children, everyone from the village had once carried lathis and flags to set fire to the British circle office in Jhanjharpur, they had seen the struggle with their own eyes. Vikaspur was a large village, spread over a thousand bighas, with about four hundred and fifty families who had lived together for generations in harmony.

Before independence, it was a zamindari village. Through the game of land tax and revenue, most of the farmlands had passed into the landlord's hands. The villagers still worked their plots, but as sharecroppers, dividing the harvest and giving a share to the master. Slowly the awakened ones began to buy back the land whenever they could, adding their labour to their ancestral capital, and built their lives anew.

Floods and droughts struck almost every year, but with changed thought and action, even those calamities turned into blessings. The people no longer sat helplessly with hands on their heads. They searched for remedies. Floods were no longer curses, nor was drought. They began to think: floods trouble us only for four months from Sawan to Kartik; the remaining eight months are free. If we work steadily in those eight months, the whole year can be lived in comfort. And water is not fire, it does not destroy everything. Water is productive capital, so we must learn to use it.

They thought the same way about drought. Every field did not

need the same kind of crop or the same amount of water. Some grains, fruits, and vegetables thrived in plenty, others in scarcity. When the rainfall was abundant, the crops grew heavier; when it was less, there was poor harvest. The government too offered some help, borewells at ninety percent subsidy and pumpsets at fifty percent. Soon the village had enough borewells and pumpsets, and water came into the farmers' hands. Among these farmers stood Shivnath, shoulder to shoulder with the rest. His land was small, yet he never lacked grain or water.

At six in the morning, Raghunath bathed in lukewarm water, dressed neatly, had tea and biscuits, and left for duty. Shyama stayed alone in the apartment. She did not understand English, so she could neither manage the household shopping nor talk to anyone to pass the time. In nearby flats lived other Indians, yet each was from a different part of the country, some from Kerala, some from Madras. Seeing how language divided people, Shyama often thought, "Animals are better than humans; they live together naturally, while humans, just by the power of speech, turn themselves into kings and strangers."

Like a caged parrot that cries when it sees another flying free in the sky, Shyama too sat in her room with quiet sorrow. She thought, "What sin of a past life has brought me to this state? From my mother's home to this foreign land, I have lost everything."

Every morning Raghunath left for the office, where even eating and drinking had become mechanical. He spent twelve hours a day with machines, his mind, hands, and body working in rhythm with them, until he himself seemed to have turned into a machine, without feeling, without compassion, without love.

But that day, as soon as he reached the office, something unsettled his heart. His mind drifted away from work. He submitted a leave application and returned home. Without removing his clothes or shoes, he fell flat on the bed.

Just as the first drops of rain fall on the hot earth of June and stir a fierce clash between heat and coolness, a storm rose inside Raghunath's mind. Thoughts collided and whirled. His long-silent reason began to awaken, and from that awakening came a voice:

"I am far less than those who, carrying pitchers of water on their heads, still tend the flowers of our motherland and live beside

their parents and their people. The world today belongs to a few who have counted and measured everything. Now, standing at the edge of my life, I realize I never truly understood my own family, nor my village, nor my society."

Tears flowed from both eyes, streaming down Raghunath's cheeks and falling onto the bed. Shivnath smiled faintly, rose from his cot, and called to his wife, "Where are you? Come here for a moment."

Rukmini came near with a gentle smile and said, "What is it so early in the morning that you are calling me like this?"

"It came to my mind," Shivnath said, "that we should perform our own shraddha while we are still alive. If I die first, who knows whether you will do mine; and if you go first, who knows if yours will be done."

Rukmini laughed softly. "I am not about to die yet."

"Have you forgotten our wedding?" Shivnath replied. "You were six, and I was seven. Remember how they measured our heights with a stick before joining us as husband and wife?"

For a while she was silent. Then Rukmini said quietly, "Anyone who forgets their own marriage, their home, and their parents, can that person still be called human?"

Shivnath smiled again. "To me, you are still the same girl who came to this house in a veiled palanquin on the day of duraagaman. Tell me, how could I not see in the sound of your bangles the music of life, or in the redness of your vermilion the sweetness of living itself? We have crossed seventy-five and are nearing eighty. Isn't that something to be glad about? Before my eyes I see how, five days after a wedding, bangles break and vermilion fades. But look at us, we have been lucky, haven't we?"

Hearing his words, Rukmini smiled too. Her eyes met his, and in that steady gaze she saw their whole life, past, present, and all that still remained unfolded before her. ❑

Dr. Hemant

Every day, Dr. Hemant would rise at four in the morning. But today he awoke at six, later than usual. His sleep had broken on its own. Why? Perhaps because on ordinary days, the constant worries of home and hospital never let him rest. Some nights he stayed awake till dawn, while on others he woke suddenly from dreams heavy with foreboding. At times he quarrelled with his wife over trifles, unable to contain the restless mind that refused to be still.

When he opened his eyes at six, he glanced at the clock. Yet, despite waking late, there was not a trace of anxiety in him. His mind felt light, unburdened, like the air after a long storm. Usually the bed itself became a field of turmoil; thoughts swarmed around him, cases pending at the court, his son's uncertain job prospects, the compounder's carelessness at the clinic, and the way the young assistants, drunk and disorderly, drove patients away in disgust. Repeated warnings from the hospital about his negligence on duty added to the weight. True, he had been neglectful, but what choice did he have?

If he abandoned the case, his father's earned property would slip away. If he scolded the compounders, the clinic might close, taking with it his only steady income. They were all old employees, treated like younger brothers for years; how could he now rebuke them? And after all, he was not the only doctor in town, patients would always go where they found better care.

Dr. Hemant's life had been tangled like a ball of thread, impossible to straighten. But this morning felt different. The knots seemed to have loosened. Why? Because yesterday he had finally submitted a written statement in court: I have no claim to my father's property; hence, I wish to withdraw from the case.

And as if fate had waited for that release, his son received a job appointment the same day and left to join, accompanied by his mother and wife. Twenty years of struggle, income, and pride had sunk into the quicksand of that inheritance dispute. Yet in renouncing it, Dr. Hemant had reclaimed something greater, his peace.

He felt that just as nothing had come from his father's property, Ramesh too would get nothing from what he had earned. But there was a difference between them. He had two brothers, and disputes had arisen among them, while Ramesh was alone, without such entanglements.

Although Hemant's worries had ended the day before, his work kept his mind from drifting into calm. Only once, around eight in the evening, did restlessness return. After that he went to the toilet, washed his hands and feet, ate his meal, and by nine o'clock everything was done. The day's fatigue was heavy, so as soon as he reached his bed, sleep began to settle. He meant to turn on the radio and listen to the news, but could not. The radio played on, and he slept through it.

When he woke, he felt a craving for tea. But there was no one at home. He was alone. He had kept no servant, because until yesterday his wife, son, and daughter-in-law were all there to manage the household. Everything for making tea was in the house, only the one who made it was missing. Getting up from the bed, performing his morning routine, he thought, I'll have some tea. But who would make it? Perhaps he would first shave and, on his way to the clinic, stop at a stall for tea. Yet, he thought, only those without family go to the stalls so early. He had everything. Oh well, he could make the tea himself.

He prepared the tea, sat down on a chair, and was about to sip when a voice called from the gate, "Doctor Sahib, Doctor Sahib."

Setting the cup on the table, Hemant walked toward the gate and replied, "Yes, I'm coming."

Outside stood the postman, a satchel slung over his shoulder, two envelopes and a receipt in hand. Smiling, Dr. Hemant said, "What good news have you brought so early?"

The postman said nothing. From the top pocket of his khaki shirt, he took out a pen and handed it along with the receipt. The doctor signed both receipts, took the two envelopes, and went back to his chair. Sipping tea, he placed one envelope on the table and opened the other.

It was a government notice: “Vacate the premises immediately on receipt of this letter. Due to severe flooding, there has been great loss of life and property. You are directed to proceed to Lachmipur today. If you delay or refuse, the police will be sent to enforce this order. A copy has been forwarded to the local police station.”

When Hemant read the notice, his face went blank. A thought rose in him: I am alone in the house. How can I just leave it? Times have come when daylight robberies happen. There are thefts, kidnappings, murders. In such times it is not wise to abandon your home. Yet when you are on duty, you must obey orders. If he refused, then, just as twenty years of earnings had been lost in court battles, these remaining five years of his job could also end in suspension or dismissal.

A calm life had never belonged to Dr. Hemant. Deep anxieties gnawed at him constantly. Even after finishing his tea the sweat from his body would not dry. He opened the other envelope with a muttered prayer. The letter read, “Dr. Hemant, tomorrow at four, by the pipal tree near the back pond, hand over two lakh rupees to our man. If not, the day after tomorrow you will not see this world again.”

At those words his heart thudded like a struck drum. He broke out in a cold sweat. The letter trembled from his shaking hands and fell to the floor. His thoughts turned toward caution and prudence.

It felt to him like entering a dense forest, with the growl of tigers on one side while the light of the sun faded and darkness closed in from the other. His mind churned in vain. What to do and what not to do, he could not decide. Just as a blunt plough cannot cut into hard soil, his thoughts could not carve a way through the problem. There was no one nearby to listen and ease his mind.

Then a clinic compounder arrived by rickshaw and shouted from the gate, “Doctor Sahib?” Hearing the voice, Hemant hurried to the gate. The rickshaw was loaded with two bales of cotton. The

compounder stepped down, flicked away his bidi, and came forward with folded hands. He said, “Get ready and come, otherwise the police will come and disgrace us. They will disgrace me too, but I will be gone on the rickshaw before the police arrive, so say nothing. We heard Mohan babu being abused swearing on the road, so do not delay. There is a train at nine. Be ready by eight. We two are on the same team.”

As if a cold wind had struck his limbs, Hemant shuddered at the compounder’s words. He said in a trembling voice, “Dinesh, I have felt uneasy since last night. Nothing seems right. There is no peace in my body. I feel like I might simply collapse.”

The compounder replied, “Take some medicine. You will feel better in a little while.”

Hemant answered, “This is not a bodily pain. It is the mind that aches. How will medicine cure that?”

Watching Hemant pace back and forth, the compounder added, “Of course, you aren't well but if you ignore the order, it may be worse.”

Hearing that, Hemant grew even more faint. A flood of questions rose in him. If they delayed, they would have to give answers later. Yet leaving the house was felt wrong. The moment they left, thieves would come and plunder everything. Without him, the clinic would not run. How could he even ask Ramesh to stay? Ramesh had joined the job only yesterday. If Hemant told him to remain behind, how would that work? Kidnappings happen every day.

While he hesitated, the compounder urged, “I will not suffer disgrace on account of you. I am going.”

Half-dazed, Hemant said, “Wait two minutes. I will change clothes.”

Quickly changing, he packed a lungi, a towel, a shirt, pants, and an undershirt into his bag and took his leave. They were so hurried that he forgot his mobile, his watch, and his shaving kit. As they climbed into the rickshaw, a police vehicle arrived. In his haste his spectacles fell down and one of the lens and the frame broke. Seeing the police drive past he felt a little calm. A short way down the road,

he saw Dr. Sunil with his children heading toward the market. Hemant asked the compounder, “Has Sunil babu not been assigned duty?”

After a moment’s silence, the compounder said, “I do not know the exact details, but it seems those who spend more time in the hospital have been left behind.”

Hearing the compounder’s words, Dr. Hemant felt a deep pang of guilt. His mind went back to Dr. Sunil, his colleague and friend, and the life he lived. Dr. Sunil too was a physician, one of two brothers, with his father still alive.He had four sisters, all married and living in their married places in the villages where schools were scarce and opportunities for girls limited. Sunil himself had studied in the village, but after earning his medical degree, he moved away.

His elder brother worked as a teacher in a high school in Darbhanga. The family was large: parents, two brothers with their wives and children, and even the nieces and nephews from all four sisters’ families who came there to study. Yet Dr. Sunil’s household was unlike most others.

He ran his clinic for only two hours a day and devoted full eight hours to the government hospital. His private chamber was modest but well-organized, with four compounders and all the necessary machines for tests and diagnoses. The earnings from the tests were shared fairly, each compounder receiving a percentage. The system worked smoothly. As they were rewarded for their effort, the compounders worked with sincerity. Although they handled most of the routine work, Sunil personally checked every report and account himself. This discipline drew even hospital patients back to his clinic for follow-up tests.

Gradually, other private diagnostic centers began to lose business. Dr. Sunil’s name spread across Sitamarhi, Darbhanga, Supaul, and Samastipur. People from distant villages spoke of him with respect. His home, like a calm river, flowed quietly and steadily, without quarrels or noise.

Thinking of Sunil’s family, Dr. Hemant began to reflect on his own. He remembered his father. After studying medicine in Bengal, his father had started practice in the village because government

hospitals were few and far between. Yet patients were never lacking. The scarcity lay not in the sick but in the healers. It was a large area, and most treatment relied on village healers, herbalists, and faith cures.

Dr. Hemant's father, Dr. Dayakant, was skilled in all kinds of medicine but especially known for three areas: setting broken bones, treating snakebites, and curing paralysis. For everything else, villagers still trusted their traditional healers. Even so, Dayakant earned well and soon built a two-storied house and bought fifty bighas of land.

He educated his three sons thoroughly. The eldest became a lawyer, the middle one a doctor, and the youngest a professor. As long as Dayakant lived, his was known as one of the most respected and educated families in the region. There was deep affection among the brothers, respect between elder and younger, and constant harmony at home.

Their mother, though uneducated, carried the wisdom of tradition, while the father brought the vision of modern learning. Together they watched with pride as their sons' hard work made the family prosper. Each son was married into a good, educated household. Even the dowries had been generous. Life in those years seemed to promise only progress and peace.

Dr. Dayakant had died, but his wife lived on. The three brothers got lost in their own lives. Each settled with his own family; the house was left to their mother. The responsibility for the family fell into the hands of the daughters-in-law. Each brother tried, in his own way, to move ahead. Gradually their eyes turned to the village property. They tried to grab as much as possible. Greed for the land grew, and disputes began. A lawsuit followed. Mother received one room and two bighas of land from the court. The rest of the houses and fields were seized. One case dragged on for forty years and required police duty. Twenty years later, Dr. Hemant wrote to the court that he had no claim on that property.

On the Darbhanga platform, Dr. Hemant saw dozens of doctors leaving for duty. Compounders were there too. But no one smiled. Faces were drawn. No one had a laugh on their lips. Like men carrying burdens on their heads, they stared straight ahead while their

hearts were heavy from flood relief duty. They prayed silently, “Oh God, oh God.” No one spoke. Eyes rose for a moment and then dropped again.

The train bound for Nirmali arrived. As it came, everyone hurried, gathered their things and climbed aboard. Hemant boarded as well. The compounder craved abidi. He lifted the two cartoons into the carriage, then came down toward the betel shop. In the mean time fifteen or twenty women vegetable sellers, crowded the carriage, some climbing in and some pressing against the door. Other passengers heard the shouting and moved forward. The compounder, puffing his fourth bidi, stood near the carriage entrance. Seeing the crowd of vegetable sellers, he hesitated, thinking he would not be able to get on. Quietly he waited below. Suddenly a passenger sitting inside rose and shoved a bundle down the steps. The bundle which fell belonged to one of the vegitable sellers. All the vendors caught the man, abused him and also beat him. The carriage was full of shouting and scuffles. Seeing the chaos, the compounder climbed up at once.

As the train whistle blew, everyone rushed to board, but the quarrel did not stop. The shouting and cursing went on. The entire noise of the train seemed to come only from that one carriage. Irritated, Dr. Hemant rose from his seat, climbed onto the luggage rack, and placed his bag under his head. Lying down, his thoughts wandered over his life. He began to think: Father had worked so hard, earned all that property for our comfort. But have we ever found peace in that wealth? My own income is not small either, yet in these twenty-four hours of each day and night, how much time do I really live in peace? When I sit to eat, the phone rings; when I lie down to rest, someone calls again. Is this what a happy life means?

He could not find an answer to that question. His thoughts turned back again. He remembered his mother, who had raised three sons strong as the hills, yet had no one to offer her even a glass of water in her old age. How often must she have thought that a life without such sons might have been better? And who could say the same would not happen to him someday?

The train reached Ghoghardiha. Passengers began to get down,

talking among themselves that the track ahead near Kisnipatti had been washed away, so the train would not go further. The compounder touched Hemant's leg and asked, "Doctor sahib, are you asleep?"

"No," Hemant replied.

"Everyone is getting down. The train won't move ahead. Shall we get down?"

Hearing this, Hemant felt as if a heavy weight had fallen on his chest. But what could he do? Half-asleep and weary, he got down. On the platform, rickshaw and Tonga drivers were shouting, "Going toward the western embankment of the Kosi?"

The compounder signalled to one rickshaw driver and asked, "We have to go to Lachmipur. Do you know the way?"

The rickshaw driver said, "My home is in Lachmipur too. Because of the flood I'm driving rickshaw here."

The compounder asked, "How will we go from here?"

The driver replied, "I'll take you up to the embankment. From there, you'll get a boat that will take you to Lachmipur. I'll drop you right at the place where my brother runs the ferry."

"Very good," said the compounder."Load the bales."

Everyone climbed onto the rickshaw and set off. When they reached near the old rice mill ruins by the eastern crossing, Dr. Hemant asked the rickshaw driver, "What kind of village is Lachmipur?"

The rickshaw driver said, "It's a beautiful village, about a mile west of the Kosi. The people are hardworking. During the flood season, we drive rickshaws, and when the water recedes, we return to farming. We tend cows and buffaloes. Some of us run boats, some catch fish. People from our village don't go to Punjab or Delhi for work. In other villages, families are split, half of the men are gone to the cities, but not in ours."

Hearing about fish, the compounder asked, "Then fish must be quite cheap there?"

"Yes," the driver replied."There's no shortage. Everything is

fresh. You won't find such delicious fish in towns or market where it smells rotten as of dirty water."

When they reached the western embankment of the Kosi, the rickshaw driver took them to his brother's ferry ghat. Seeing the rickshaw, his brother came running up from the boat. Together they lifted the two bales onto the ferry. Half of the boat had wooden planks laid down, the other half was bare. A mat of dried reeds was spread across the planks. Sitting there, Dr. Hemant looked eastward and felt as though they were sailing into the sea. His body went cold. Fear crept into his heart at the thought of crossing such deep water. He remembered driving his car along the smooth pitch road of Darbhanga, but even there accidents happened. People died on dry land too.

Then another thought came to him. The boat had no engine, just bamboo poles. What if the poles broke midway? They could drown before anyone knew. Where would they go? The thought shook him. Yet amid that fear, a realization dawned. All this time, he had treated the compounder as a servant, but that was wrong. The man was more like a younger brother.

Moved by that thought, Hemant turned to him and said, "Boy, the people here are truly blessed. They worship the goddess and still fight the river with courage. No wonder they are strong of spirit."

The boat pushed off from the bank, and Kamlesari, the boatman, began to sing in a low, flowing voice. As he lifted the pole and pressed it into the water, Dr. Hemant watched quietly and thought that people who worked like this hardly needed medicine or exercise. His mind wandered to Rameshwaram, to the shimmering sea where waves rose and fell just like these. Then he remembered Jaisalmer, where the endless white sands gleamed under the sun. When Kamlesari's song ended, he began another, a hymn to Mother Kosi.

The rhythm of the pole striking the water made its own strange music, khut-khut, and khut-khut. The splashes fell on the boatman's body, but even the cool water could not stop his sweat. His arms moved without pause, steady and strong.

Dr. Hemant's thoughts drifted again. He began to compare the waves of the sea with the waves of the Kosi. In the ocean of human

life too, he thought, waves rise and swell, powerful for a moment, then calm down. But the current of the Kosi never rests; its force tears through mountains and turns them into fertile plains. It breaks down old villages, sweeps away ancient customs, and opens the way for something new, just as trees shed their old leaves and grow fresh ones with every change of season.

Lost in such reflections, Hemant asked the boatman, “How far is your village?”

“Six kilometers” replied the boatman.

“How long will it take to reach?”

“We’ll go by the Bhattha route, so we’ll get there sooner.”

The word “sooner” brought a flicker of hope to Hemant’s heart, but it faded quickly. All around him stretched only water, no sign of land, and no village in sight. He grew anxious and fell silent. The boatman kept singing softly to himself, calm and at ease.

Sometimes Hemant found the song pleasant, sometimes it stirred irritation in him. Then suddenly a dead body floated past. Everyone’s eyes turned toward it. Seeing it, Hemant’s mind flashed to the corpses in the hospital, though these two deaths were not the same, one from illness, the other from the flood.

New thoughts and fears rose inside him, turning over like waves. His mind sank into confusion. Just then, a big fish, about a kilo in weight, leapt into the boat. Both Hemant and the compounder started with surprise. The boatman set aside his pole, caught the fish quickly, dropped it into a tin half-filled with water, and said with a smile, “Now your journey has found its blessing.”

Hearing the boatman’s cheerful words, Dr. Hemant’s thoughts grew tangled again. What exactly, he wondered, is a journey? Is it the moment one leaves home, or the act of reaching the workplace? Or does it end only when the task is done and one returns home? Furthermore, a new task may occur before the earlier one is not finished.

He asked the boatman, “How far is our destination now?”

Pointing southward with his finger, the boatman said, “That’s my village there. You can just make out the cluster of jamun trees.

Hardly half a kos (kilometer) away."

"Half a kos!" exclaimed the compounder." Doctor Sahib, it's already five o'clock. Another half hour, and we'll be there by half past five."

"Yes, we'll reach early." said Dr. Hemant, watching the distant horizon. No birds flew in the sky. Birds only fly where there's land to rest, and here there was none, just endless floodwater. Only a few water birds wheeled in the distance, skimming the surface.

As the boat neared Lachmipur, the women and children, and a few men too, came running to the riverbank. They called out to one another, "It's the supply boat."

"There must be rice and flour."

"Maybe new clothes too."

"There'll be tarpaulin sheets."

"Big officers have come."

The boat touched the shore. But when the villagers saw the doctor and the compounder in their trousers and shirts, the tribal women covered their faces, and the men stepped back shyly. The children stared, half-curious, half-fearful.

Tying the boat to a post, the boatman called out, "Hey, Sulochana, the doctor sahib has arrived. There's medicine in the trunk. I'll unload that, and you take the tin. There's a big fish in it, fry it nicely and serve the doctor sahib."

Sulochana lifted the tin and carried it into the courtyard. She set it down, washed her hands at the well, wiped them on her aanchal, and began spreading a school cot for the guests. Then she fetched a large bed-sheet and two pillows from inside.

Dr. Hemant and Dinesh stood at the entrance, their eyes following her movements. Among so many people, their gaze rested on her alone, on the graceful rhythm of her work. When everything was ready, Sulochana turned to them and said, "Doctor Sahib, the bed is spread. Please rest."

Dinesh stayed silent, but Dr. Hemant said softly, "Buchchi, my body feels heavy. We rested on the boat, but I still feel tired. I'll bathe

first."

"Very well," she replied.

Sulochana went to the courtyard to fetch a bucket and a mug. She brought them to the well, scrubbed both clean with clay, placed the mug inside the bucket, filled it with water, and said, "Doctor sahib, please bathe."

The bathing tank was surrounded by low walls, open to the sky. Standing there between earth and heaven, Dr. Hemant felt strangely exposed. For a moment he hesitated, but soon he realized there was nothing unusual in it. Men of all ages were bathing nearby, some in drawstring trousers, others in lungis or short towels. He did the same.

Sulochana, about twelve, did not move away from the well. She had reached the threshold of womanhood, and the soft glow of that change had begun to show in her face. But in Dr. Hemant's mind was the calm, professional awareness of a doctor. He knew every function of the human body, yet he also knew that life itself carried a warmth that was beyond anatomy, a warmth made of delight and creation. In Sulochana, that warmth bloomed like a bud, fragrant and innocent, floating in the quiet air.

When Hemant poured the first mug of water over his head, a thought came to him: I am standing now on a land where life and death live side by side, yet here everything feels so pure and calm, filled with the music of living. Three years ago, this same region had been struck by a terrible flood that destroyed many villages, lives, and homes. But what of those who survived? Could they abandon the soil that had given them life? Never.

Floods were no longer unexpected here. The barrage gates had been opened out of necessity; the water from the north had risen so high that it threatened to burst the dam. Yet the villages downstream had no warning, no means to save themselves. The Kosi had spread between its twin embankments like a sea, from the shallows to the horizon.

South of Kunauli, along the river's edge, stood a village. That was Sulochana's home. Everything she owned, everyone she loved, had been swept away. She had survived only because she was away at

school in Kunauli. On her way home she saw the flood spreading. She stood on the embankment, weeping and helpless. Just then, four men from Lachmipur were returning by boat after buying supplies from the market. Seeing her crying, one of them, Jiyalal, called out, “Little one, why are you crying?”

Sobbing, Sulochana said, “Baba, I had gone to school. In the meantime, my village was washed away. Now where will I live?”

Jiyalal replied gently, “Come with me. I have twelve grandchildren already. I’ll raise you like one of them.”

Hearing these words, a spark of life returned to Sulochana’s heart. Her sobbing stopped, though every now and then a quiet hiccup escaped her. The four men loaded their goods onto the embankment and sat smoking chilam before setting off again. Sulochana sat apart, clutching her books.

Raghuni took out a chilam, a small tin box of tobacco, and a matchbox, placing them on the ground. One man cleaned the pipe, another rubbed the tobacco between his palms. When the pipe was ready, they packed it tightly, held it between their hands, and drew it to their lips. Raghuni struck a match, touched it to the bowl, and blew. With a few strong puffs, the chilam crackled to life, glowing red. The smoke rose thick and pungent, and after each round, all four men passed it along, inhaling deeply until the haze settled around them.

When the smoking was done, they climbed back into the boat. It was evening now, the sky dim and quiet. The cattle and buffaloes were already returning home from the fields, their calves trotting behind, and tails swinging. In the same way, Sulochana followed the men from Lachmipur, quietly stepping after them.

As she climbed into the boat, the man at the pole invoked, “In the name of Kosi Maharani.” And softly, Sulochana joined in, “Jai.”

The boat drifted away from the bank. The men thought of Sulochana’s fate, but their hearts were lightened by her courage. For her, the grief of losing home and family had begun to turn toward hope. Though her village and loved ones had vanished, she believed her parents must still be alive somewhere. Human beings are not lifeless stones, she thought; they have reason and will to survive.

Somewhere, somehow, her parents must be living, and one day she would meet them again.

To her, this sorrow felt not endless, but only for a time, a sorrow that, sooner or later, would pass.

When the boat reached Lachmipur, Jiyalal's twelve grandchildren came running down to the bank. Seeing them, Jiyalal smiled and said, "Children, I've brought you a sister today."

Sulochana became a guest among Jiyalal's grandchildren. The next day, Jiyalal built a small hut and told her to teach the children of the village. Sulochana began teaching them, and that same Sulochana now stood before Dr. Hemant.

After bathing, both Hemant and Dinesh changed clothes, combed their hair, and got ready. By then, Sulochana and Jiyalal's eldest granddaughter, Kamli, had roasted flattened rice and fried the fish.

Carrying two large plates heaped with chura-bhujja and crispy golden fish, the two girls placed them before the guests. On the bigger plate, the thick, flaky pieces of fish gleamed above the rice. After setting down the plates, Kamli went to fetch water, while Sulochana sat nearby, smiling quietly. The food was simple and pure, yet full of flavour. Hemant and Dinesh ate with delight, cleaning the plates completely, ten pieces of fish and all the rice. After drinking water, Dinesh let out a satisfied burp and said, "Doctor Sahib, I've never eaten so well in my life."

Dr. Hemant laughed softly. "I feel the same."

Sulochana asked, "Doctor Sahib, will you have some tea?"

"Of course," Hemant said, "but after two hours. I'll do a little work first. It's evening already, but while there's still light, I'll see ten or fifteen patients."

"Alright," Sulochana said." You get ready. I'll call the patients."

The compounder opened the box, laid out the medicines neatly, and the patients began to arrive. One by one they came, and Hemant examined them carefully, giving instructions to the compounder who handed out the prescribed medicines.

There weren't all kinds of illnesses here, only those common in flood-affected areas, fever, infections, skin disease, weakness. The medicines too were simple but effective. Within three days, Dr. Hemant had seen nearly the entire village. The work exhausted him, but the posting was for seven days.

The roads were still difficult, though the water had begun to recede. By the fifth day the paths were drying, yet mud and slush lingered everywhere. On the eighth morning, as the sun rose pale over the river, Dr. Hemant said to Sulochana, "Girl, today I'll be leaving."

Sulochana said, "Doctor Sahib, this is Mithila. How can you leave without eating or drinking something first?"

She went off to make tea. A friend had come to meet the compounder, so he stepped outside, leaving Dr. Hemant alone.

Hemant sat quietly, lost in thought. The seven days he had spent here had been both the hardest and the most peaceful of his life. He knew he would never forget them, nor did he want to. Never before had he imagined living as he had in those days, among simple people, in struggle and serenity together. For the first time, he had served those who truly needed a doctor. Until now, he realized, he had treated only those who could afford to pay. The poor in the villages, the ones without money, had been left to suffer and die without help.

As these thoughts filled his mind, Sulochana returned with the tea. Handing him the cup, she smiled and said, "Your face looks sad today, Doctor sahib."

"No, not really," he said. "Just thinking about something."

Sulochana sat down nearby. "How do you like it here, Doctor Sahib?"

Hemant said nothing. He remained silent, staring into the cup of tea. Seeing his silence, Sulochana spoke softly." I am still a child, Doctor Sahib, so I don't understand much. But I'll tell you one thing. Sugar is sweet and chili is bitter. Yet worms live in both, each in its own world. But if you drop a worm from sugar into chili, it won't live even a moment, and that's natural. Still, if you put a chili worm into sugar, would it live there either? It would die too. Life in the village and life in the town are like that."

Hearing Sulochana's words, Dr. Hemant thought to himself that she was right. It was the same with people too. But how could it be otherwise? Until equality came into social life, such divisions would always remain.

After finishing lunch around ten, both men changed into lungi and vest, folded their shirts and trousers, packed everything into their bags, and prepared to leave. Sulochana carried Hemant's bag, and Kamli carried Dinesh's, walking behind them.

After they had gone a little distance, Hemant turned and said, "Buchchi, you can turn back now."

At his words, Sulochana's eyes filled with tears. Handing him the bag, she said softly, "My last pranam to you, Doctor Sahib."

A sudden wave of emotion rose in Hemant's heart, and tears welled up in his eyes. He could not speak. Lowering his head, he started walking forward again. But after a few steps, he felt as if Sulochana and Kamli's gaze were following him, piercing from behind. Turning around, he saw them still standing there. For a moment he thought of waving goodbye, but then he noticed his own state, barefoot, his lungi pulled up to the knees, a sleeveless vest on his body, his hair blowing in the wind, and droplets of water still drying on his skin.

Still, he lifted his hand and gestured for them to come closer. Both girls smiled and walked up to him. Seeing them, Hemant too smiled and said, "Buchchi, I'm giving you my Darbhanga address. Come, visit sometime."

Sulochana smiled shyly and uttered, "I would get lost in the city, Doctor Sahib. When you were in our village, I felt as if the Darbhanga hospital itself had come here."

Saying this, Sulochana bent down and touched his feet. Then she turned back toward the village.

At the embankment, Hemant and Dinesh washed the mud from their feet, changed into their shirts and trousers, and began to walk toward the station. ❑

Bobby

A day before Durga Puja began, the old woman from Sirkhariya came with a basketful of smooth, wet clay from the riverbank to plaster the courtyard and decorate the walls with festive designs.

By the roadside, under the ragged summer shade of a thatch, Bobby was plucking bitter gourds when the old woman noticed her. Holding a small basket of clay with one hand and wiping the sweat off her brow with the other, she called out, "Bobby, how many days left for Chhath?"

Bobby's eyes searched for shriveled and mature gourds. She knew that immature gourds were bitter and less tasty. She searched carefully the rotten gourds because if they were not picked in time, they would ruin the rest.

Hearing the woman's voice, Bobby glanced toward the path but turned back to her vines. The load on her head was heavy; it didn't seem right to stop her for small talk. The basket of clay was full, and the hoe stuck in the mound looked weighty enough. She thought to herself, "It's hardly a month or so before Chhath, what's this rush for? Counting out the lunar dates would take too long, and the longer she stood there, the heavier the basket would feel." So she just lowered her gaze without replying.

But the old woman wasn't one to let it go. If I don't ask now, I'll forget later, she thought. And if I forget, something will surely be missed. By chance, while digging up the clay she'd remembered the fair on Dashami day, when she had bought three conical baskets, one winnowing basket, and one large basket, enough for their Chhath offerings.

Seeing Bobby still looking down, the old woman spoke again, half-teasing, half-irritated: “Who listens to the poor now, Bobby? No one cares to answer.”

Her words touched Bobby’s heart. Not anger, but affection rose in her chest. Suddenly she smiled, one of those small, shy, vivacious smiles, and said, “Dear, I was just thinking I’d give you four of these gourds for your curry. That’s why I was peering at them so closely. Wait a bit, will you?”

Sirkhariyawali said, “You never answer straight, Bobby. Instead of replying, you’re trying to charm me with those gourds.”

A strange conflict began to churn inside Bobby. On one hand, she could feel the weight on her head pressing down; on the other, she was being asked to calculate the exact time till Chhath. She realized it was not just a matter of one month, it was two full months away. And not ordinary months either, but the ones crowded with festivals, one after another like clusters of fiery chilies tied on a string. Unless she explained things properly, neither her own mind would rest nor would the old woman understand.

Trying to balance sense and patience, Bobby said, “Dear, go for now. I’m busy in arranging for vegetables and you’ve got enough load on your head already.”

But Sirkhariyawali thought to herself: This is Chhath we’re talking about. If I don’t set things in order now, I’ll surely miss something later. Chhath was not an ordinary festival; it demanded space, expense, and precision. So she replied, “At the Dashami fair when we bought those conical baskets, the winnowing basket, and the large basket, I already felt that the work had begun early.”

Bobby smiled faintly and said, “Do one thing, dear. Put down that basket for a while. It’ll ease your body, and it’ll also help me count properly.”

Sirkhariyawali sighed. “Bobby, my head’s gone numb carrying this weight. The clay’s heavier than it looks.”

Bobby nodded and said, “Yes, dear, this will take some careful counting.”

“Oh, stop with all that. Just tell me when Chhath will fall. I’ll

come by some other day and learn the details."

Bobby began to count on her fingers, her lips moving softly as she murmured: "Today is the new moon of Ashwin. Today we'll invoke the Goddess and offer food to the jackals and snakes. Tomorrow the Kalash Sthapana will mark the beginning of Durga Puja, which will last nine or ten days. On Dashami day, the idol immersion will take place. Five days after that comes Kojagara, the festival of the full moon night. After Kojagara, the month of Kartik begins. On its new moon we'll celebrate the festival of lamps, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja. The next morning is Govardhan Puja, then Bhai Dooj and Chitragupta Puja. From the evening after Bhai Dooj, the preparations for Chhath begin.

On the first day, people cook fish and millet. On the second, they bathe and eat purified food. On the third comes Kharna. On the fourth evening, the first offering to the setting sun is made, and on the fifth morning, the second offering to the rising sun. After that, the fast is completed."

Counting on her fingers, Bobby said, "Dear, about a month and a quarter is left for Chhath."

"How much is a month and a quarter, Bobby?"

"Two twenties minus three days."

"I always buy the conical baskets, winnowing basket, and big basket at the Dashami fair. How many days are left for that?"

"The fair starts seven days after the Goddess is offered her eyeballs during the Puja. It goes on for eight days. But tell me one thing, why do you buy them so early? Till then you won't even use that money for anything else. Why not buy them when the festival draws near?"

"Buying early saves a few coins, and I feel lighter in mind once something's ready. Once, when I didn't buy in advance, everything got delayed. So, I washed and polished the old baskets and managed with them for the rituals."

Hearing her, Bobby's thoughts drifted to the festival itself. She thought of the greatness of Chhath, especially for the farmer. On one side are the sweets and offerings made in memory of ancestors; on

another, the baskets, winnowing containers, and conical baskets crafted by the Dom community. Then come the earthen pots, lids, and pitchers shaped by the potter. And finally, the fruits, vegetables, spices, and all the produce of one's own land. All of it comes together for that sacred moment of offering water to the setting sun.

Thinking silently, Bobby said nothing for a while. She felt a quiet reverence for women like Sirkhariyawali, those from the region where the sun and rain themselves seem to bow before their labour, women who till the soil like spirits and win over even God with their devotion.

But then she thought: If I stay silent too long, the poor thing might feel ignored.

Still, this woman wasn't one to leave quickly. Like a crow lingering over Bhusundi's tale, she kept on talking. Seeing that the cooking was getting late, Bobby began to grow uneasy. Yet Sirkhariyawali seemed even more restless, as if her thirst was increasing the longer she stayed.

Finally, after some hesitation, Bobby asked gently, "Dear, how are your daughters doing?"

At the mention of her daughters, Sirkhariyawali paused, recalling something deep within. "Bobby, what can I say? All three of them are better off than me. God harmed me, that's why I'm left like this. Otherwise, would I be living this way?"

Bobby said, "God never does wrong to anyone. What makes you think He did that to you?"

Shaking her head, Sirkhariyawali replied, "Didn't He? He gave me children five years apart, each one after another. That much was good, whenever one stopped feeding, the next would come. But He gave me three daughters in a row, and there He didn't spare me. If those three had been sons instead, at least I could have married them off with pride. Now I'm the one doing all the heavy work myself; no daughter-in-law to share it. Later, I did have a son, but he's still a little boy."

Bobby asked, "Where does your eldest daughter live?"

"She lives in the northside, near Khutauna station. She doesn't

have much land, but she and her husband work hard. They own a pair of oxen, two milking buffaloes tied to the post, and three young calves. Their crops are good enough to last the year."

"Do they have children?"

"Yes, three. All of them are boys. My daughter keeps herself worn out caring for them, always working, always busy. And besides, there's the household to manage."

"And what about your second daughter?"

"She's married eastward, on the banks of the Kosi River."

"Why did you choose that side, by the river?"

"Bobby, I didn't plan it. The village seemed fine, but who could've guessed the Kosi would shift course that way? Still, even with the river close, they don't lack food or water. Only, the people there aren't as neat and clean as us. The buffaloes are plenty, and the paths are always wet and muddy."

"And the youngest?"

"West of here, in Pahi. She's my queenly daughter. When she's home, she feeds me a feast of vegetables and curries, each one better than the last. She cooks with such skill that no one can match her, nor her way of speaking, her songs, her manners, her clothes. When she sings, the whole house stops to listen; when she works, everything shines around her."

Bobby said, "It's getting late now. You should go too."

Sirkhariyawali replied, "I've got a bad sign today. I was thinking of fetching clay and reap in the paddy, as the early paddy failed this year. Tomorrow I'll be engaged cleaning the yard again."

Everyone in the village treated Bobby as the central figure. And rightly so. Whenever anyone fell sick or faced misfortune, she was the first to arrive and take charge, tending and comforting as if it were her own home. Likewise, if ever Bobby herself fell ill, the whole village would rally around her. People felt that if anything happened to Bobby, the village would lose its very rhythm of festivals and rituals.

She had never been to school, never read or written a letter. There was no need. She carried in her memory the entire calendar of

the year, the sequence of festivals, their rituals, the customs of birth, thread ceremonies, and weddings. She knew by heart which song should be sung on which occasion, how to perform every prayer and worship, every offering and aarti.

Yet, for all her wisdom, one sorrow kept tugging at her heart. After her son was born, she never conceived again. She had always wished for one son and one daughter. The son came, but not the daughter. She often spoke of this pain openly, saying, “For creation to grow, both man and woman are needed. Without both, life halts. The world cannot move with men alone, nor with women alone.”

On the evening of Bhardutiya, Bobby cooked fish and millet gruel. The next day would be the ritual bath and sacred meal, and the day after that, Kharna. For Kharna, Bobby always saved a special variety of paddy called Satariya dhan, used to make fine rice. From the neighbourhood rituals of Kharna to the final offering at the riverbank, everything rested on Bobby’s shoulders.

But on the day of Kharna, confusion always reigned. Some people brought rice made from fine paddy with jaggery, others from coarse paddy. Rice was rice, yet everyone insisted their grain was special. The mixture of varieties made it hard for Bobby to cook the pudding evenly. So she quietly set aside all the rice brought by others for her own meal and used her Satariya rice to prepare the sacred kheer for the offering.

And she didn’t stop at her own ritual. In her heart, she always wished to prepare enough kheer for every household, to ensure that no home in the village had to light a fire on the evening of Kharna.

It was Chhathi day, the evening offering to the Sun.

Before dawn, Bobby woke and went straight to the courtyard where all the ritual preparations were laid out. Many things were ready, many still left to be arranged. But the whole day was meant for that, cleaning, arranging, and setting everything right.

In the midst of this, she heard someone calling, “Bobby, Bobby!” from the lane. The voice was unfamiliar, muffled by the morning air. She thought to herself, it must be someone with a question about the festival. Standing at the veranda, she called out,

"Who is it? Come inside."

Soon, Rahmat's mother entered the courtyard, carrying a bamboo tray filled with offerings, two coconuts, a few betel leaves, some bananas, two lemons, two pomegranates, two yams, two colocasias, two pieces of turmeric root, a handful of raw turmeric and ginger, and other small ritual items. Setting the tray before Bobby, she said softly, "Bobby, I've brought my share of offerings, both for myself and for you."

Bobby bent down and looked carefully at each item, admiring how neatly they were arranged. She knew the story behind this visit. When Rahmat was little, he had fallen seriously ill, and his mother had vowed that if he recovered, she would perform the Chhath fast every year. She had kept that vow ever since.

Although Bobby prepared her own sweets and offerings at home, flattened rice, jaggery, and the traditional thekua, Rahmat's mother always gave her some money as a token for sharing her efforts.

As Rahmat's mother lifted her tray to leave, Bobby stopped her and said, "Dear, wait a moment. Take a little nabed (sacred food) from my Kharna."

Bobby brought a banana leaf from the kitchen, placed a serving of kheer on it, and handed it to her. Holding the sacred food, Rahmat's mother's face lit up with joy. Her heart was filled with faith that her son would live a long and healthy life. She silently bowed her head to the Sun god and turned to leave.

Just as she stepped out of the courtyard, Parichhan arrived with a bundle of sugarcanes. He gave one piece to Bobby and one to Rahmat's mother, and hurried ahead to deliver the rest to others.

Handing the piece to Bobby Rahmat's mother said, "I have to go to the market today, Bobby, so I'll be a little late reaching the river."

Bobby replied, "Don't worry, dear. I'll be there. Why should you be anxious? The Sun, the Lord of all days, never leaves anyone unblessed. We only need to keep our own faith and discipline strong."

Bobby placed the offerings down in bits and pieces. Just then

she heard a commotion from the south side of the courtyard. Stepping up to the veranda, she learned that at Khushiya's house the baby had grabbed a banana from the pile and eaten it, and in anger the mother had beaten him with a stick. At this khushiya was angry with his wife. The noise reached the lane, so from the veranda Bobby called out,

"Today is a holy day, and you all are making a racket this early. If a milk-sucking baby has broken one banana and eaten it, why is there so much noise?"

Hearing Bobby, the two quieted down, though the little one still fidgeted. At that moment Sonrevali arrived and said, "Bobby, I tell you every thing-good or bad. Look, I have got no basket nor conical basket for lack of money."

Bobby fell silent for a moment. After a pause she said, "If there is no betel, a betel stalk will do. Those who have gold and silver raise their hands to ornate baskets; those who do not, manage with bamboo trays. Why should anyone feel small? Everyone should do with what he has. People offer what their means allow, so why should the Sun blame anyone?"

Meanwhile, Deepwali, holding the hand of her five-year-old boy, shuffled forward and said, "Bobby, look, this boy is so naughty that he pulled the elephant idol down. It was a good thing that only one leg of the elephant was broken, when the whole image would have been broken to pieces."

Smiling gently, Bobby said, "Look, dear, all this is mere show. What matters is faith in the heart. Why scold the child now? Let him go."

By then the sun had risen, and everyone had reached the riverbank. Baskets were being laid out carefully, songs of devotion filled the air, and women stood waist-deep in the water with folded hands. The drummers struck a steady rhythm, and the pond shimmered with the light of countless lamps. Even those who lived far away had returned home to observe the festival.

One devotee, bound by a vow, brought some dancers to dance there. But soon two young men, drunk on liquor, started bursting firecrackers nearby. The noise grew wild. When one man's cracker

fizzled with less sound, the other mocked him loudly. Stung by the taunt, the first grabbed his rival by the collar. Both began to shout and curse in their own dialects. Words turned to blows, and soon the two were fighting fiercely.

The next morning was the time for the final offering to the rising sun. In the darkness before dawn, everyone again gathered at the riverbank. The water glowed under rows of lamps placed all around. As the first light of sunrise appeared, the lamps began to fade, and hands slowly rose to offer prayers.

Rahmat's mother stood at the edge of the pond with her children, holding the edge of her sari, eyes fixed on Bobby. Just then, Musba arrived carrying a glass of milk. As he poured it, a few drops sprinkled over every basket in offering.

Stepping out of the water, Bobby changed her sari and began to recite the story of Chhath. When the tale was finished, she sprinkled holy water around and brought the ritual to its close.

The drummer, who had played a steady rhythm all along, now shifted to a farewell beat. The dancers began to sing samdaun, the song of farewell and joy.

Everyone gathered his baskets, placed them carefully into their trays, and one by one handed the drummer a piece of thekua (sweet bread) and a banana as an offering before returning home. ❑

Kamini

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From the field, Bhaiya Kaka came carrying a lota (water pot) and called out along the path.

I was already packing my things to go to take the matriculation exam. Actually, I am a heavy sleeper, but I had already told my mother to wake me a little early, otherwise I would miss the train. The train leaves at half past five. It takes about half an hour to reach the station. If I leave home by quarter to five, only then will I catch the train. If that train is missed, I will be on the road the whole day. From Nirmali there is only one direct train to Jainagar. Otherwise one has to change every train at Sakri. In spite of this all the bus drivers have become so cunning that not a single train has the timing of a mail train. If I sat on Sakri platform for three or four hours, then finally a train from Darbhanga might come. By then the crowd would be so thick that boarding becomes difficult. So catching this direct train is essential. Besides, my schoolmates will take the same train. The areas beyond are risky, so travelling to remote places alone is not right. I have heard there are many rascals in those parts. If any of my belongings are snatched, I will be in worse trouble.

Hearing Bhaiya Kaka I did not delay in getting ready. His voice is so thin that it is quite distinct from every other sound. Sensing his voice I called out from the outhouse room, “Kaka, come, come. I am awake too. The five o’clock train must be caught, so we should finish packing.”

From the road Kaka came into the courtyard and said, “First let me wash my hands. Then we will sit down and chat.”

He moved toward the eastern side. I answered with a quick 'yes 'and started arranging the luggage. Kaka placed the lota on the

veranda's low bench and sat down on the cot. Sitting there, he reached into his pocket, took out a torn pack of foreign tobacco leaves, broke off a piece and asked, "Brother, where is the sahib?"

I replied, "He went to Navani yesterday afternoon and hasn't returned yet."

Hearing this, Bhaiya Kaka plucked some tobacco from his pouch, pressed it into his palm, and said, "I'll go now. If I finish early, I'll come back again."

I didn't like the idea of Kaka leaving so soon. He had just arrived, and I felt wrong to let him turn back immediately. So I said, "Kaka, you set a fine example in the village. No one has ever given his daughter in marriage with such generosity. You've made a record."

Hearing his own praise, Kaka smiled.

"My boy, times are changing. That's why I thought I should marry my daughter to a well-educated man. My girl isn't highly educated, but she can read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata fluently. She can write and read letters too. She's well-versed in household duties, and that's all she needs. She doesn't have to work in an office that requires school or college certificates. We belong to a family of householders; educating a daughter beyond a point isn't good."

"Why not?" I asked.

"In our families," he said, "there's work from cow dung to clay dishes, all kinds of household tasks. Who will do them? You'll see, educated women don't like to touch such chores. Tell me then, how will a household run?"

I couldn't find a convincing answer to his reasoning, yet silence didn't feel right either. So I said, "If times are changing, then education for everyone is necessary, isn't it? If all are educated, all can work, earn well, and the family will prosper faster. And now that there's reservation for women, it's easier for them to get jobs too."

Bhaiya Kaka said, "You've spoken well, but tell me one thing. If both husband and wife work in the same school or office, then fine, they can live together and manage the household. But what happens

when the man's job takes him to another district, another state, or even ten miles away? How will it work then? A family runs through the union of man and woman. There are many things in a home that need both to be present. A human being is not like a tree that, if one cuts off a branch and plants it somewhere else, it grows on its own. You're no longer a child not to understand such things. A child stays in the mother's womb for nine months that is two hundred and seventy days. After the fourth or fifth month, the mother's body begins to face many pains and ailments. The child's growth depends on proper food, rest, and care. Now, if the mother is alone, how will she manage both a job and motherhood? Wouldn't she need help?"

I said, "But in other countries, both men and women work and live comfortably."

Bhaiya Kaka replied, "What do you mean by other countries? Do all countries have the same customs, habits, and ways of life? No, not at all. Some may be similar, but many are different. In some places, all property belongs to the public; there the system is completely different. Everyone has access to facilities and care. That is fine for them. But here, in our country, things are not like that. Our conditions are different, and here it does not work as easily as there."

Realizing I had no convincing answer, I decided to let the conversation rest. Just then, Mother came from the courtyard. Seeing her, I turned toward the room to finish packing my things.

Mother, looking at Bhaiya Kaka, said, "Brother, you have outdone everyone in the village. No one has ever spent so much on a daughter's wedding."

Smiling with quiet pride, Bhaiya Kaka said, "Bhauji (sister-in-law), give Kamini your blessings so that she may live happily in her new home."

Mother said, "May God bless her that she may build her family in joy and peace. Have all the guests left now?"

Bhaiya Kaka said, "Yes, Bhauji. Yesterday, after performing the Satyanarayan puja, I finally got some rest. Only the Sarhoji (brother-in-law's wife) remains now. She too is restless to leave, but I want to keep her for five more days."

Mother replied, “You arranged your daughter’s wedding like a grand celebration, and now you’ll keep entertaining Sarhoji like a guest of honour forever.”

Kaka caught the hint in her tone. His thirty-two teeth shone like popped corn as he laughed and said, “Bhauji, if you ask about hardship, it was no small task. I barely had time to eat or drink. For three nights, I didn’t even close my eyes once. But I must thank Sarhoji; he worked like a spinning wheel, day and night, never stopping. Even with all that exhaustion, he never frowned, always had a smile on her face. That’s why I thought of keeping her fivedays longer as a guest.”

Mother asked, "How many children has she got as yet?”

“Not one. She’s been living with her in-laws for three years now. She can’t be more than twenty or twenty-two.”

Mother said, “These days, people have children within a year of marriage, and you say it’s been three years already!”

He laughed, “Ah, I had mine after five years, and you talk of three years as a big gap.Well, let me ask you this, my brother is a year older than me, and you’re a year and a half younger than him. Didn’t you both go to every healer, priest, and magician then?”

Realizing she was losing ground in the argument, Mother quickly changed the subject and asked, “So, how much did everything cost altogether?”

Bhaiya Kaka replied, “If you ask truthfully, Bhauji, I tried to be frugal. Still, it went beyond five lakh rupees. I gave three lakh in cash, then one and a half lakh in goods, jewelry, utensils, firewood, and clothes. The welcome for the groom’s party alone cost over fifty thousand. And beyond that, there were all the little useless expenses too.”

Mother said, “If you spent so much, then why do you still say you were being frugal?”

Bhaiya Kaka replied, “Look, Bhauji, I have ten bighas of land. Beyond that, there’s plenty of other property- trees, bamboo, house, cattle, and all. But I leave all that aside and count only the land. In our village, land prices range from ten thousand to sixty thousand per

kattha. If we average it out, the price comes to about thirty-five thousand per kattha. None of my plots are worth less than forty thousand a kattha. Taking that as the base, each bigha comes to eight lakh rupees, and ten bighas make eighty lakh.

I have three siblings. To me, a daughter is as dear as a son. I never draw distinctions like others do. Now you tell me, in such a situation, does what I spent really seem excessive?"

Seeing the seriousness in his tone, Mother said thoughtfully, "In your view, how much should a father ideally spend on his daughter's wedding?"

Bhaiya Kaka replied, "Bhauji, that question doesn't have a straight answer. Every family is different, and so is every life. But as far as I'm concerned, a son and a daughter deserve the same kind of life. Still, it's a serious issue, one that can't be answered in haste."

Mother said, "Do people really think so deeply?"

He smiled faintly. "If they didn't think at all, Bhauji, then things wouldn't be the way they are. When we don't understand something, we should never hesitate to ask others."

Kamini's marriage had been arranged with Lalababu. Both were equally healthy and well-built. There was only a slight difference in their complexion: where Lalababu was fair and rosy, Kamini's skin was of a deeper brown, neither dark nor light. The elders believed that after some time, their complexion would match.

Three months after the wedding, Lalababu was appointed as a demonstrator in a college. As soon as he got the job, he used the dowry money to buy one and a half kattha of land in Darbhanga and built a house there. Thus began his shift from village life to the city. Life started to change. On one side, the new age of urban modernity gripped him, and on the other, the essence of rural simplicity began to crumble.

The house was filled with things of comfort and luxury. There was no sign of financial strain. Since he was the only son in the family, he sold off property from the village bit by bit, spending freely to satisfy his desires. Kamini, a daughter of Mithila, kept herself away from her husband's affairs. She believed that a wife

should not interfere in her husband's work. Their relationship became just like that of most couples, restrained and polite, yet distant.

Meanwhile, the standard of education declined. People of all kinds entered the temples of Saraswati. Once, giving private tuitions was considered a lowly act, but now it had become a mark of success. Those who had earlier called it unworthy were themselves teaching for money. The result was that the ignorant grew powerful, and the learned turned into mere symbols of foolishness. Lalababu, having both wealth and ambition, was quick to seize the opportunity.

For twenty thousand rupees, he bought an M.Sc. certificate in Physics. The university had also passed a new rule giving preference to college demonstrators for teaching posts. Soon, Lalababu became a professor of Physics.

Professors had no strict duty hours like school teachers or clerks. The college remained closed for six months of the year, and even during the rest of the months, attendance was irregular. On top of that, there were casual and medical leaves to be taken at will.

Within five years, Lalababu's parents passed away. Their death, though sorrowful, brought him financial gain. He sold the ancestral property and deposited the money in the bank. Yet he did one remarkable thing, he bought five large cupboards and filled them with books. Perhaps it was the heat of money or the heat of pretense, but not the heat of study. The passion that once could have turned him into a true scholar had turned instead into vanity. His thinking had changed, like tea made with cold water and cold milk.

By this time, after six years of marriage, two children had been born. Amid her duties, Kamini kept dancing to the rhythm of domestic life, while Lalababu had little time or concern to see her world. But perhaps that was only natural, for every young man, sooner or later, must walk his own chosen path.

As evening fell, Lalababu came straight home from the hotel and began changing his clothes in the room. He removed everything, from top to bottom, his body glowing with a feverish heat. In the small niche of the wall where the household deity's image was kept, he had placed a small lamp. Normally he would light his own room's lamp first, but today, without thinking, he lit the deity's lamp instead.

Then he switched on the fan and forgot to light his own.

His throat was dry with thirst, but he was too tired to walk to the tank for water. Stumbling slightly, he sank into a chair. His eyes fell on the table beneath which stood a jug filled with water from the previous day. He lifted it, drank deeply, replaced it, and leaned back, closing his eyes.

In his half-dazed mind, he thought of the sparrow that used to flit across the open sky outside his window. His gaze drifted to the image of Mrignayani, a college student he had noticed for some time. Then, briefly, his thoughts returned to his wife, Kamini, and the two daughters. But the bright, youthful face of Mrignayani returned again to his mind, pushing everything else aside. At last, he made a decision: he would bring Mrignayani into his home. Gradually, his restlessness began to settle.

The next day, after completing formalities in court, Lalababu returned home with Mrignayani. Seeing her, Kamini did not panic. She remembered the stories her grandmother used to tell, how in earlier times it was no sin for a man to have two wives. She busied herself with her chores, untroubled, her own youth glowing quietly within her.

Eight years after marriage, the same Lalababu who had risen from demonstrator to professor had now become the plaything of a woman. How strange the turns of human desire are!

At eight in the evening, Lalababu and Mrignayani returned from the market on a motorbike. They entered the room and sat on chairs beside each other. Lalababu placed a bottle of brandy on the table.

The table, as if offended, seemed to speak: “My friend, don’t disgrace me so openly. I am meant to hold books, not bottles.” But it endured everything like the girls of Mithila and also like the wise scholars in the court of Mithila king.

From glass tumblers, both Lalababu and Mrignayani poured themselves a drink of brandy and sank into their own intoxicated world. The subject soon turned to Kamini.

Mrignayani said, “Listen to my thought.”

“Go ahead,” Lalababu replied.

“If all the desires of a husband can be fulfilled by one wife, then what need is there for another?”

“None,” said Lalababu.

“Then what’s the use of keeping Kamini as a co-wife?”

Lalababu fell silent. He thought of Kamini, pure, gentle, and fragrant as the first petal of a flower.

Mrignayani leaned forward and said slowly, “There it is, the soft heart of a man. Then it’s my duty to remove Kamini from the path.”

Seeing the beauty of Mrignayani, even the Creator might have regretted His own design. Why had He built such a delicate bridge between man and woman, yet none between woman and woman?

Kamini overheard their words. Just as fire burned in Mrignayani’s heart against her, so too did flames rise in Kamini’s own heart against Mrignayani. But she controlled herself. She understood that now three lives stood at a crossroads, hers, her husband’s, and those of her two daughters.

In silence, she walked to her room, looked at her children for a long moment, and then lifted the elder, six-year-old Rita, and the younger, three-year-old Sita, into her arms. Without another word, she stepped out of the house. Her heart burned within her, leaving no room for thought or fear.

Reaching the station, Kamini asked about the next train. It was four hours late. With both her daughters, she sat on the platform, waiting. A thousand thoughts swirled in her mind, but she brushed them all aside until one question held her fast: The parents who gave me birth will surely take me in. And if they don’t, the world is wide enough; I will find a way. She decided she would go to her mother and father first.

At one thirty in the night, the train arrived. Kamini boarded it with the two children and, by dawn, reached her home station. All three were faint with hunger. Yet the strength of a woman from that land is like the earth itself, able to bear every pain in silence.

Still, seeing her daughters' faces, worry pulled Kamini deep into a sea of thought. Should she beg for food to feed them? No, never. Should she let their lives end here, in despair? Impossible. But how to reach her parents' house?

Gathering her courage, she went up to an old woman selling murhi and kachri near the station and said, "Sister, my home is in Dukhpur. I'm on my way there. The children haven't eaten all night; they're crying from hunger. Please give me two rupees' worth of murhi and kachri on credit. I'll pay you back tomorrow."

The old woman, without a moment's hesitation, replied, "Child, if you have no money, what of it? I too have four grandchildren. I know the hunger of children."

She handed the food to Kamini's daughters. The three ate and then left quietly.

By the time Kamini reached Dukhpur, the sun was already a full bamboo high in the sky. At the southern edge of the village stood a pakhar tree. Beyond that tree, Kamini could not bring herself to move. Sitting beneath it, she broke down and began to weep.

In the fields nearby, women were cutting grass. Hearing her sobs, they came running with their sickles and baskets. Seeing the two children in her arms, they gently took them, and with compassion and concern, they led Kamini back home.

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